THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Summary Report
Imagining Inclusive Schooling:

Listening to Disabled Children's Voices in China

Executive Summary

In China, the mainstreaming of disabled children into regular schools started in 1980s, with the implementation of a national education policy 'Learning in Regular Classrooms' (LRC). Although its policy framework has been gradually adapted to the global movement for inclusive education, little is known about what is happening in classrooms and schools. In particular, disabled children's views and experiences of their school lives remain unheard.

The research 'Imagining Inclusive Schooling' is driven by a stance that values disabled children's voices. It adopted an ethnographic and ethical approach to research with children. Fieldwork was conducted in 4 mainstream primary schools in Shanghai, involving 11 children with learning difficulties, 10 class teachers and 3 resource teachers. Multiple methods were utilised including participant observation, interviews and participatory activities. Rich, in-depth and contextual data were collected and thematically analysed.

This research highlights several key findings. First, the necessity of listening to pupil voice is reaffirmed. The child participants were sensitive, observant and reflective about the circumstances in which they were living. They revealed hidden knowledge of barriers to their learning and participation that was less known to teachers. They offered informative and valuable comments on practice and shared their aspirations for improvement.

Second, the research found that in spite of rhetorical change in LRC policy, the meaning of inclusive education failed to be addressed in everyday schooling process. Disabled children were still experiencing forms of marginalisation and exclusion, such as lack of support for academic learning, restricted opportunities to access extra-curricular activities and spaces, being bullied by peers and limited participation in decision-making. In addition, the expanding provision of 'resource classroom' to promote inclusion was instead found to be interrupting children's sense of togetherness and generating negative labelling effects for them in schools.

Third, the research identified facilitators of and barriers to disabled children's learning and participation in the context of Chinese schools. The exclusionary process was strongly fortified by the prevailing special educational thinking and practice, which not only marked out disabled children as incompetent and in need of protection, but also underrated the existing good practice in regular classrooms. The exclusionary process was also further reinforced by the charitable model of disability in Confucian society and the competitive and performative school culture. Nevertheless, teachers could play important roles in negotiating inclusive and quality provision for all. Teachers' attentiveness to children's worlds was observed to be in connection with their demonstration of inclusive practices. The implications of pupil voice for developing inclusive practice were further discussed. It proposes a working model for teachers, with pupil voice as a core starting point. Overall, China still has a long way to go before ensuring inclusive and quality education for disabled children. This research calls for a paradigm shift to encourage new ways of thinking and collaboration at all levels within the country. It concludes that children must become essential partners in transforming and imagining possibilities for inclusive education.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Introduction

This report is a summary of the research project 'Imagining Inclusive Schooling' (IIS; Wang, 2016). In the project, a group of disabled children and teachers shared their views and experiences of current schooling in mainstream primary schools in China. It attempted to examine whether disabled children were well supported to learn and participate alongside their peers, to shed light on what could be done to realise an inclusive education for every child. It provided in-depth insights into what's happening in classrooms and schools with implementing the policy 'Learning in Regular Classrooms' (LRC) to enrol disabled children into regular settings. This report presents the background, process, main findings and implications of the IIS project.

Background

Disabled children are more likely to be marginalised in education (UNESCO, 2010). Historically in many parts of the world, these children were often denied any form of schooling or only enrolled into segregated settings such as special schools, subject to negative consequences like low achievements, limited participation, discrimination and stigma. In the past decades, with the implementation of several influential international guidelines, such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the Convention of Rights for Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) and the recent Education 2030 (UNESCO, 2015), accessing inclusive and quality education has been recognised as one of the fundamental rights for disabled children. Nevertheless, despite promoting the agenda of inclusive education in policy, in developing and developed countries, struggle continues for these children to battle with marginalisation and exclusion that take place even within mainstream schools. Challenges prevail for changing practices in classrooms and schools to make a difference in children's real lives.

In this research, inclusive education does not mean another form of special education. It is about providing quality education for every child, so children can enjoy learning together with peers in neighbour schools regardless of their individual differences. It concerns the acceptance and celebration of diversity, and the realisation of children's dignity. It is widely recognised that inclusive education involves a never-ending process of removing barriers and promoting the presence, participation and achievement of all learners (Ainscow, 2005), taking account of those who can be vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion in education (Florian, 2014).

The Chinese context:
Learning in Regular Classrooms

When China's education system was established in 1950s, it was considered that disabled children should be accommodated in segregated schools (GAC, 1951). Although disabled children's rights to education were recognised in legislation (NPC, 1986), it was not until the late 1980s that the mainstreaming of disabled children started. This happened with the implementation of LRC policy, which was adopted as a cost-efficient strategy to universalise 9-year compulsory education (MoE et al., 1989). With the endorsement of international advocacy, it has seen a series of policy change in China to align LRC with the global movement of inclusive education (MoE, 1994, 2009). In the lasted revision of the Regulations of Education for Persons with Disabilities (SC, 2017), the agenda of inclusion is explicitly stated. At present, there are about over half of the designated disabled children studying in regular classrooms at compulsory level (MoE, 2013).

However, besides the positive influences of LRC such as facilitating disabled children's access to regular settings, there are several issues that reflect a gap between LRC policy and an international standard of inclusive education. First, disabled children's admission into regular schools is often based on their ability to adapt to regular education – the rights were not granted as unconditional (e.g. NPCSC, 2008). Second, disabled children still constitute as the only group of children in China whose exclusion from regular schools can be legitimised. Third, disability is predominantly seen as a medical condition rather than a social issue, which tends to downplay the impact of educational provision. The education quality for disabled children in regular schools also seems to be hardly guaranteed. Researchers frequently warned the incidents of neglect and the research on teachers' attitudes consistently showed the resistance towards a full acceptance of disabled children (e.g. Deng & Zhu, 2007; Ma & Tan, 2010).

In all, the existing research has suggested the overall reluctance to implement inclusive education in Chinese regular schools. Nevertheless, it has not provided sufficient insights into schooling processes. Most particularly, disabled children's voices were absent. Without learning about how children themselves view and experience the kind of education provided for them, it is impossible to know whether we are getting it right in the name of inclusion.

The importance of listening to pupil voice

Internationally it has seen the recognition of children's participation in decision-making over matters about their lives, as advocated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). Researchers have argued that children's perspectives should not be overlooked in how we understand inclusive education (Allan, 2010). The engagement of pupil voice is itself manifesting the principle of inclusion (Messiou, 2012). It is necessary to listen to what children have to say about the educational provision and make improvements based on their views.

Listening to pupil voice involves both formal consultation and informal interactions with pupils (Morgan, 2011). It is important to respect the diversity in children's views and experiences, and to make sure that the ultimate purpose of listening serves genuine personal reasons rather than institutional needs (Fielding, 2010). After hearing the views, it is critical for schools to take actions so listening would not be treated as one type of formality. In addition, teachers' roles in mediating and supporting pupil voice need to be recognised (Mannion, 2007; Wyness, 2009).

The existing research evidence suggests that engaging pupil voice can be beneficial for developing inclusive practice. For example, Ainscow (2015) asserted that listening to children was the most influential factor in responding to learning diversity: it not only improved the practice, but also shifted the assumptions that endorsed the practice. Messiou (2012) noted that children's comments could inform teachers about the facilitators of and barriers to inclusion. Similarly, research that explored disabled children's views revealed the negative impacts of labelling and special provision (Rose & Shevlin, 2004). Nutbrown and Clough (2009) found that children's views had led to practitioners' actions to create a more inclusive and enabling environment.

Disabled children's voices are particularly vulnerable to be silenced and unheard. They tend to be seen less likely to offer reliable views (Tisdall, 2012). The marginalising of their voices can also be reinforced by the difficulties of eliciting voices especially of those with cognitive or communicative challenges. Thus to promote these voices, it requires us to shift assumptions about what disabled children are capable of, and seek methodological innovations. Besides, careful consideration needs to be given to several aspects during research process, to realise collaborative relations, effective communication, and ethical and participatory approaches. Empirical research has shown that disabled children could perform as their own gatekeepers when appropriate methodology was used (e.g. Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Mortier et al., 2011; Wright, 2008).

Research questions

The IIS project was to explore what's happening in classrooms and schools by examining disabled children and their teachers' views and experiences. The following research questions were formulated to guide the inquiry process:

- How do disabled children (designated as LRC pupils) understand, experience and negotiate their learning and participation in regular schools in Shanghai?
- How do teachers, being significant adults for children, perceive and negotiate the learning and participation of disabled children (designated as LRC pupils)?
- What are the facilitators of and barriers to their learning and participation?

Methodology

The IIS project was conducted in 4 state primary schools in Shanghai, involving 11 children with learning difficulties (3 boys, 8 girls, age 9-12), 10 class teachers and 3 resource teachers. Shanghai was chosen as the research site because of its status as forefront of Chinese educational reform. Nonetheless, it is important to be aware that its well-resourced and established modern education system is not representative for the whole country. After seeking consent from head teachers and parents, consent was gained directly from children and teachers, informing them about their rights to drop out and issues of confidentiality.

The research adopted a stance of researching with children (Fraser, 2004), building rapports and enhancing children's participation in the process. The inquiry was ethnographic, focusing on the interactions in classrooms and schools that facilitated or hindered the child participants' learning and participation. The Framework for Participation (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) was adapted to guide the data collection and analysis around four elements - access, collaboration, achievement and diversity.

Multiple methods were used to collect data. First, participant observation was conducted to document child participants' daily lives in lessons and activities at school as well as teachers' practices. Second, participatory activities were carried out with individual children. They were invited to show places they liked or disliked at school (Stalker, 1998). Photo-elicitation interviews were conducted during which children were given photos of everyday classroom activities, and they would allocate them into categories of good or bad things about schools (Porter et al., 2008). Children were then supported to comment on practices and their relationships with teachers and peers. An activity named 'seed in a pot', which was adapted from 'message in the bottle' (Messiou, 2012) to suit the cultural context, was also used to encourage children to share their aspirations of change. Throughout these activities, symbol signs were available for children for them to use to express their feelings, put a stop or ask questions. Teachers were interviewed by individual following semi-structured guidelines. Fieldnotes and audio recordings were transcribed and thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
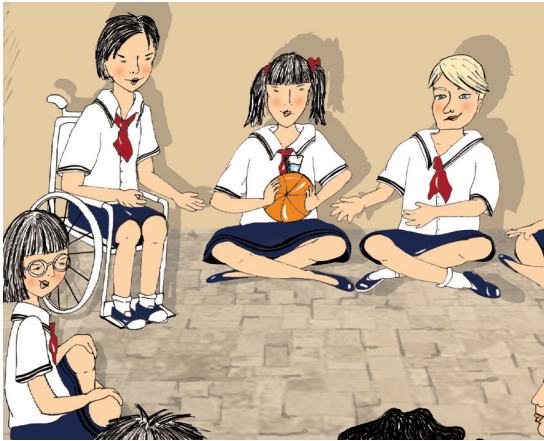
Main findings

The main findings of the research will be presented following the structure of the Framework for Participation (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). It highlights children's views and experiences, and teachers' perspectives and practices of negotiating their learning and participation in regular schools. The names used here for the participants are pseudonyms to protect their real identities.

Participation and access

Joining and staying in the school and the class

All the child participants were enrolled into their schools like other pupils without difficulties, with the implementation of compulsory education. Three of them were already designated as disabled before they reached school age. Other children were designated afterwards when teachers and parents noticed the challenge of academic learning for them. The child participants were randomly allocated into classes, the same as others. Although children found it hard to recall their early school days, some did notice the changing attitudes of teachers – from welcoming everyone to moving them to 'special' seats such as the back corner of a classroom.

Over the years, children did not face risks of exclusion with the implementation of LRC. Indeed, they had to stay in the regular schools because there were no available places at the special school in the jurisdiction. The staying, however, was based on a condition that LRC pupils' academic performances would not count for schools' league tables (at primary level). This was used as a strategy to ease regular schools' resistance of accepting these children, which had many implications in practice. While many teachers endorsed the strategy because this somehow relieved their pressure to raise these children's attainments, they expressed their concerns over the lack of monitoring of these children's learning outcomes and a discomfort over labelling. Also, such practice tended to make children with lower academic results more prone to identification and designation.

Accessing the curriculum

Many children mentioned the difficulty of keeping up with the standard curriculum. Teachers acknowledged that the standard of the curriculum was already very demanding for pupils without learning difficulties. To what extent the child participants could access the curriculum varied considerably, mainly depending on individual teachers' practices. Sometimes, these children were almost completely left out with no access to classroom teaching and learning, when teachers paid little attention to how to support them: Children either were given nothing to work with or allowed to do anything that would not disturb other pupils. They could not be given necessary tools to complete the tasks. For example, the child Rui spent all his art lesson trying to obtain a pair of scissors for paper-cut. Without being helped by teachers and peers, when other children were celebrating their achievements at the end of the lesson, he still did not finish the work.

To prioritise the core subjects – Chinese, English and maths, all schools ran a narrowed curriculum. The lack of diversity in subjects meant that there was little space for children's individualities in their interests and skills, and limited opportunities for teachers and pupils to learn about what the child participants were capable of. For instance, the child Wu was good at craftwork and he helped other children with their tasks too, however, the craft lessons were often replaced by the core subjects.

Accessing extra-curricular activities

In schools, there are often extra-curricular activities to enrich pupils' experiences. The research found that the child participants' opportunities to access these activities were largely restricted. They were often asked by teachers to not to join school-wide competitions because they were seen as incompetent to win. They were often excluded from pupils' daily duties such as cleaning or collecting workbooks. These trivial responsibilities though mattered to a sense of belonging. They could also be excluded from field trips for the concern of safety. Only one of the child participants Dan had brief experience of being a student cadre, and she perceived its happening as more of an error from her teacher. Children understood that having less satisfying academic performances would bring them little chance of being elected by peers and approved by teachers. They also had little autonomy in what interest clubs they could join in. Usually pupils could make their own options, however, they were often allocated by teachers to do what was seen as suitable for 'slow learners'. Only a few teachers would make sure the inclusion of these children in whole-class activities. For example, when the child Lulu missed practicing for a theatre performance for being sick, her teacher Ms Shen asked her to be the host to introduce everyone, so Lulu could still step onto the stage with her classmates.

Accessing spaces and places

Avoiding risks of safety was a prominent agenda for most of the schools. During breaks, pupils were requested to stay inside of the classrooms to write their schoolwork rather than playing outside. One child Xin noted that she and her friends were not allowed to play in the garden anymore, which was her favourite place at school. The child participants, seen as particularly vulnerable for their disability conditions, were further restricted from accessing spaces and places out of overprotection.

For example, they might be asked to join the interest clubs that only used their main classrooms, so that they would not need to move around to other places – a way to reduce possibilities of accidents.

In Chinese schools, where a child is seated in a classroom could have impacts on one's educational experiences. Half of the child participants were seated by the same principles applying to other pupils. Nevertheless, the rest of them were seated in special seats, which could leave them feel lonely and marginalised. One child Lian was constantly bullied by a boy sitting next to her, however, the teacher Ms Jun felt that she had no choice because after all sitting next to Lian was unfair to anyone.

The impact of 'resource classroom'

The recent initiative in China to promote the inclusion of disabled children is to set up a 'resource classroom' in a regular school. With the opening of resource classrooms, most child participants were required to spend a certain time in a separate classroom. Only two child participants were not obliged to do so because their class teacher would like to have them in the main classroom and negotiated this with the head teacher.

Practices of resource classrooms varied across different schools, in terms of timetabling and what was being taught. Children with learning difficulties or behavioural challenges were more likely to be asked to attend resource lessons, because schools considered it easier to accommodate children with other impairments. One resource teacher Ms Zhang noted that she was under pressure from regular teachers to let disabled children spend more time in the resource classroom, which she resisted as she did not want to turn the place into a 'special class'. Some teacher participants did not support the idea of sending their pupils away but they felt obliged to comply with schools' decisions: what they did instead was to take children's interests into consideration when negotiating the timetable, such as avoiding making children miss their favourite subjects. Nevertheless, what lessons were more 'worthy' or 'valuable' to these children were often solely determined by teachers.

The child participants had little say in whether they should attend resource lessons. Many of them felt reluctant to go to the resource classrooms. One child Rui said that he would miss what was happening in his main classroom and what all his classmates were doing. For some, it felt humiliating to be in a different classroom. The child Sha had to lie to her peers about where she went. The child Xin would hide under the table in the resource classroom to avoid being spotted by her classmates from the corridor outside. In addition, children had mixed views about whether resource lessons were helpful for their learning. Some resource teachers provided intensive tutoring on academic knowledge and life skills through a supportive approach, which children found to be useful. In contrast, resource classrooms could be perceived by children more as places for playing and relaxation, when the activities involved little learning. Children who were experiencing negative treatments in their main classrooms turned out to like the atmosphere of resource classrooms. Nevertheless, this should not be used to justify the existence of such provision. It indeed reflected the need for teachers and schools to make regular classrooms inclusive.

Participation and collaboration

Pupils learning together

One of the main assumptions for implementing inclusive education is to promote acceptance among children. The child participants valued much of the opportunities to learn together with their peers: They preferred lessons with group activities and identified peers as one of the main sources of support besides teachers. However, without appropriate supervision and guidance from teachers, they could be readily marginalised during groupwork. Some of the child participants were subject to the power relations with their peer supporters. It was observed that a peer supporter could even turn into a bully out of teachers' sights.

It indeed required teachers' skills to make collaboration among pupils happen. In one lesson, the child Sha effectively participated in groupwork. Roles within her group were allocated by a discussion involving all group members. The teacher attentively inspected all groups and stepped in when necessary. When the group needed more time to complete the task, the teacher subtly extended time for them. The excitement of learning something new was shared by all when the lessons finished.

Teachers learning with and from pupils

While little space was available for teachers and pupils to learn together, some teachers would not hesitate to admit that there were things that they did not know well enough, decisions that they might get them wrong or tasks that they found challenging too. The issue was that many teachers rarely engaged with disabled children compared to other pupils, due to an assumption that disabled children had inherent limitations in expressing their feelings and thoughts, and the practical difficulties in communication. Interestingly, teachers who demonstrated more inclusive practices asserted that consulting all pupils was almost naturally embedded in their everyday actions. The teacher Ms Shen felt grateful for her pupils: her teaching was improved tremendously and by seeing children supporting each other, she realised the value of 'living together'. She felt that by respecting children's voices and trusting them to take responsibilities, pupils were also better motivated to learn.

Teachers working with each other

The participating schools had mechanisms ready for teachers to collaborate with each other, such as 'lesson study'. The introduction of a new role 'resource teacher' shifted the dynamics at school. While some resource teachers were collaborating with other teachers, tensions were also observed. On the one hand, resource teachers felt that they were not well supported by colleagues. For example, it was hard for Ms Zhang to seek other teachers' cooperation with administrative work. On the other hand, regular teachers felt that resource classrooms were in a way marginalising disabled children. It was problematic to assume special educators as the only experts who then should be responsible for disabled children. This also tended to make regular teachers feel uncertain about

their competence to support disabled children's learning and participation in regular classrooms. The different expectations from resource teachers and regular teachers could make children feel confused.

Teachers working with communities

All child participants referred to a closeness with their families, who were critical in supporting their learning. They shared what happened at school with their families and they saw themselves as family members: The child Lulu decided to drop out of a school trip to spare her parents expense. It should be noted that some teachers never blamed children's families for difficulties, and they emphasised the importance of encouraging and working with them because for a child's interest, 'everyone has to be in it' (Ms Ai). However, there were also teachers who underplayed their own roles in children's lives. In addition, teachers generally reflected that there was a lack of support from local authorities – they were not well informed about what they should do and there was no sufficient guidance for practice.

Participation and achievement

Children's experiences of learning

Achieving high academic attainment was a central agenda to all participating schools. The child participants struggled with passing exams and were upset about the fact that they were among the least performing pupils. They acknowledged their own responsibilities for learning: They worked hard to complete homework and follow the curriculum. None of them overly blamed teachers and offered their advices on how they could be better supported in a respectful and sympathetic way. They tended to engage more with subjects that they liked, which were usually taught by their favourite teachers. Children highlighted the importance of including everyone in learning. For example, the child Lulu commented on two English teachers: One would skip her when asking all other pupils to practise a dialogue (she fell asleep later in that lesson), while the other one would say that 'we all need to read it' to include her. Teachers' practices and expectations thus mattered to how children participated in learning. With different teachers, children could be active or disengaged learners showing difference in their competence and willingness to learn.

The negative impact of disability labels

Besides the stigma associated with the label, the research also found that the label itself could be extremely influential to reinforce teachers' low expectations for disabled children's competence. The teacher Ms Dai noted that she would probably treat her disabled pupil as a 'normal' child if not knowing about the label. Teachers thus would formulate such belief that there are inherent limitations to these children's learning, regardless of what a teacher could do. Teachers with low expectations would allocate 'too easy' tasks for the child participants involving little learning and challenge. Also, associated with the disability label, teachers tended to emphasise a principle of

'caring' based on humanitarian benevolence towards this disadvantaged group while overlooking the importance of learning. Furthermore, gender bias was also seen when teachers considered it more important to help male disabled students to acquire skills for future independent living.

Inclusion in the performative culture

The extent of competition among pupils, teachers, classes and schools was seen to become a major barrier for the agenda of inclusion. Teachers frequently pointed out that there was little time and space for them to think about their practices due to the heavy workload. It was common to see teachers distressing pupils for unsatisfying academic performances and hear teachers complaining about the high pressure of the job. The child participants shared their observations: Wu noted that everyone was busy studying by his or her own desk during breaks so it was impossible for him to socialise with anyone. Even the children themselves would sometimes act as the ones who excluded those that were seen as less competent. Teachers felt that it was a compromise to give up some children so they could spare more efforts for those with potentials. Ironically, teachers commented that disabled children, because of the elimination of their performances in league tables, were the only group of pupils who was entitled to a happy childhood. Resource classrooms thus became the rare relaxing spaces in schools, despite how it marginalised these children. The performative culture also had negative impacts on relationships. The teacher Ms Qian said that her relationship with the child Wu was a much more genuine one. She only talked to other pupils with the instrumental purposes of raising performances – 'study, study, and study'. But with Wu, she could chat about everything, by which she got to know the child better and experienced a sense of happiness and real connection.

What inclusive teachers are like

While acknowledging the existing practices that marginalised disabled children in mainstream schools, it is equally important to highlight the efforts of some teachers to negotiate inclusion even in such a less favourable environment. It was seen that with certain principles, they were more likely to extend the space for all pupils to learn and participate. What are inclusive teachers like in Chinese regular schools? The most essential starting point was for teachers to have the moral commitment to every pupil – it was unacceptable to exclude some children because learning should be a collective experience. They put great emphasis on their own professional development, adopting reflective practice and a problem-solving approach: The process was understood as one of trial-and-error and the key point was to not stop trying different ways. They insisted on having high expectations for all pupils and were critical towards the meaning of a label. They recognised that they had an important part to play in children's learning outcomes. They would provide a range of learning tasks to choose from to assist each pupil to learn and stay prepared to be surprised by what a child was capable of. They were sensitive to how children received the provision. They were respectful and responsive, and they trusted pupils to be accountable. They gained useful insights from internal resources such as pupils and colleagues. Although it varied among teachers regarding their practices, it was promising to see that with the presence of disabled children, teachers gradually changed their perceptions and beliefs towards this group of children, which could be productive for developing inclusive practice.

Participation and diversity

Friendships and bullying

The above sections have already given a glimpse about the child participants' relationships with peers. When being asked whether had friends at school, many of them identified none or very few. It was observed that these children were mostly alone during breaks or had some random pupils to play with. However, two of them, Xin and Dan identified many friends out of their classmates. Indeed, their class communities were also more inclusive with their class teachers effectively facilitated a supportive culture among pupils. Having friendships could bring many benefits in terms of being included in group activities, protection from bullying, and supports for academic learning.

All child participants reported experiences of being bullied at school. Bullying made them feel upset and angry. There were various forms of bullying causing harm to them, such as physical assault or verbal abuse like teasing and name-calling. Sometimes, bullying can be converted into games, especially for boys. For example, the child Rui said that he was often asked to be the 'victim' who would be chased or 'beaten' by others, but it was impossible for him to ask other children to be in the same role. For girls, bullying could appear to look like offering or asking for help. There was once that a girl came to the child Lian and insisted to tie her scarf in a different style, which made Lian cry because she struggled to get away. Other forms of bullying could involve framing or coaxing. While some children said that they would go to teachers when being bullied, many also said that they would not report bullying because first, they did not trust that teachers would listen to them and take effective interventions; second, they did not want to see other pupils being punished by teachers. Although teachers could be aware of the on-going bullying, they found it hard to come up with effective strategies. Some also saw bullying as something natural among pupils, which did not deserve too much attention from teachers.

Acceptance and belonging

The child participants wanted to be part of the class communities. They cared about other pupils' well-being. Their feelings of belongingness were associated closely with the quality of peer relationships. The child Dan, who enjoyed her school life very much said that the school was her most favourite place, and with her classmates, they would come back for reunion and visit their teachers again. The research also found that in inclusive classrooms, teachers recognised that it was important to maintain a sense of fairness to all pupils. They highlighted the value of having the child participants in their classes. They also tended to pay more attention to mediate negative labelling effects. They would listen to pupils and treat their views equally rather than seeing disabled children as less reliable. Furthermore, in an inclusive school, teachers would experience more positive and supportive relationships with their colleagues, and the role of head teacher and other senior leaders was underlined in facilitating such relationships.

Key lessons

The research findings described above showed how complex the processes could be with many factors at play to facilitate or hinder disabled children's inclusion in Chinese regular schools. In this section, the key implications of these findings will be discussed.

Learning from children

The research challenged a view that disabled children were unable to express their feelings and thoughts. Instead, they should be respected as gatekeepers who could make decisions for their lives. Children's experiences of marginalisation and exclusion showed that much needed to be done. They resisted being marked out as different and wanted to be together with their peers. They provided many important insights into current schooling, which could be unknown to teachers. The 'trivial' matters indeed constituted children's experiences, and the comments that they offered were helpful, humble and practical for teachers and schools to draw on. After all, inclusive education should be about what children experience everyday, and it is critical to ensure all children's learning, participation and well-being. Otherwise, the notion itself will become an empty term that allows marginalisation and exclusion to happen. It requires us to challenge the assumption of disabled children's low competence, and embed listening and actions in daily interactions among school members to continuously gain pupils' trust and support the emergence of their voices.
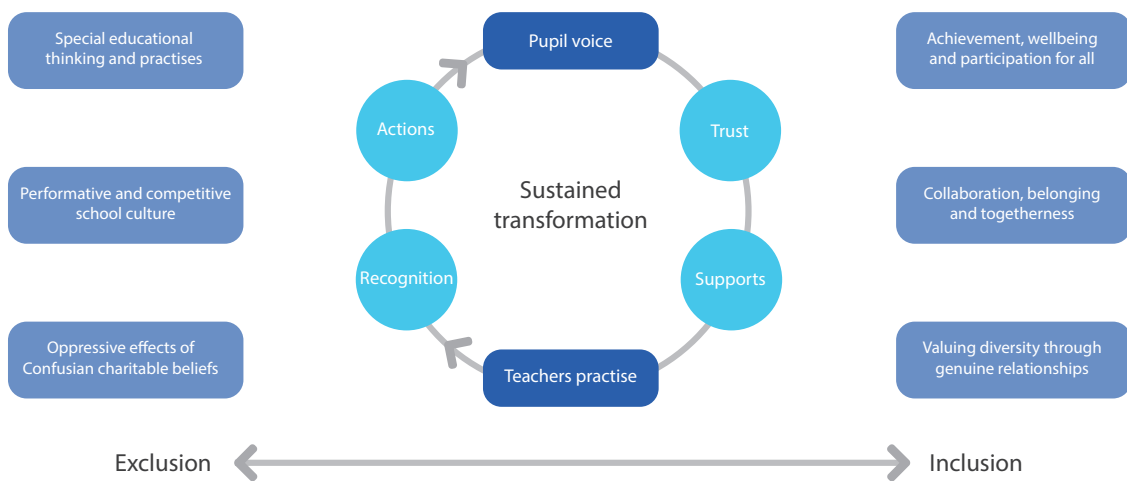
Learning from teachers

The research identified both exclusionary and inclusive practice in regular schools. It showed that teachers' practices were crucial to the inclusion of disabled children and the cultivation of inclusive communities. Teachers could adopt a medical and charitable thinking of disability through the imposing of labels and special educational practices. Meanwhile, the already existing inclusive practice could be threatened. Teachers' reflections also showed that the agenda of inclusion would not be achieved without tackling with the issue of competition and performativity in current education system, which could powerfully marginalise certain pupils and leave teachers little space to be creative and innovative of their practices. The evidence of inclusive practice suggests that it is not impossible to achieve the inclusion of disabled children in Chinese regular classrooms. Teachers need to be better supported for their professional development.

Developing inclusive practice through listening to pupil voice

This research confirmed several implications of listening to pupil voice for the development of inclusive practice in classrooms and schools. First, by hearing children's experiences and what they desire to change, teachers and schools would be better informed about what is helpful and what needs to be stopped, to enhance pupils' learning and participation. Second, children's perspectives can help teachers reflect on their practices and assumptions. Third, being attentive to children's

worlds would help teachers shape their expectations to construct space for learning and achieving, rather than setting limits to children's potentiality. Fourth, engaging pupils could help transform relationships and bridge adults' and children's worlds. Inclusive education needs to be practised day-by-day. Finally, pupils could act as internal and sustainable resources for schools besides external advices and supports. Respecting their voices is exactly seeing them as equal persons, affirming the recognition of diversity.

The research therefore proposed a working model for classroom teachers to draw on pupils' voices to develop inclusive and responsive practice. In this model, teachers and children are seen as agents who can negotiate inclusion in their everyday school lives. The implication of pupil voice cannot be realised without teachers. Thus, the interdependent relationship between teachers and pupils acts as the centre, through which a transformation of practice and experiences can be sustained. Four elements are involved in this cycle enabling pupil voice to emerge and inform practice development: teachers need to gain pupils' trust to encourage the emergence of authentic voices; effective supports are required to make it possible to hear every child without silencing some; children's voices need to be fully recognised by teachers; and actions must be taken to reassure children about the significance of their views.

| Exclusion ⟵————————————⟶ Inclusion |

Left column (Exclusion):
- Special educational thinking and practises
- Performative and competitive school culture
- Oppressive effects of Confusian charitable beliefs

Centre cycle: Pupil voice → Trust → Supports → Teachers practise → Recognition → Actions → (Pupil voice). Centre text: Sustained transformation

Right column (Inclusion):
- Achievement, wellbeing and participation for all
- Collaboration, belonging and togetherness
- Valuing diversity through genuine relationships

Moving forward

At a time when China is increasingly engaging with the global agenda of inclusive education, it is necessary for the country to learn about the experiences of other countries around what is working and what the unwanted consequences are (e.g. how the replication of special educational practices in regular schools can be unhelpful). Nevertheless, it is also important to develop concepts and practices based on local cultural and social understandings, which can be made sense of by stakeholders. Due to the lack of public awareness of disability rights and the competitive education system, China has a long way to go to transform the circumstances for disabled children. However, with collective efforts from all stakeholders, we would be able to move forward towards a shared goal of ensuring quality and inclusive education for every child. Children must be engaged as essential partners so we could imagine and create a better education together.

Recommendations

The IIS project shed light on many important issues that need to be tackled with in research, policy-making and practice in China, to promote disabled children's inclusion in education. Tailored recommendations and guidelines are included in additional brochures for various groups of stakeholders: children, teachers and head teachers, parents and NGOs, and policy-makers. The key messages are listed in the following:

1) Education is key to human development and the prospect of quality of life. Education for disabled children should not be only about sympathy but achievement and empowerment. It calls for a shifting of how we understand children and disability to challenge the low expectation of disabled children's competence. Disabled children are entitled to an inclusive and quality education. Hearing and acting on their voices is a sustainable strategy to achieve this.

2) Schools and teachers should effectively enhance disabled children's participation in decision-making through formal and informal consultation, which could generate great pedagogical and democratic benefits. Creative ways of eliciting all pupils' voices should be explored and adopted. Participatory and action research led by pupils and teachers can be promising to change marginalising and exclusionary beliefs and practices.

3) The impacts of introducing special educational thinking and practices into regular schools need to be critically examined, such as the potentiality of hindering disabled children's inclusion. It requires a clearer definition of inclusive education to address learning outcomes, and tackle all forms of risks to children's well-being and dignity.

4) It is not enough to make rhetoric change in policies while missing out how children experience what's provided at school. To realise inclusive education, there is an urgent need to develop inclusive practice in classrooms and schools. The agenda of inclusion should be prioritised in teacher education.

5) Teachers and schools need to actively collaborate with children, families, professionals, and broader communities. All key stakeholders in children's lives need to work together towards the best possible outcomes, and children must have a say over things that matter to them.

6) The implementation of inclusive education requires a rethinking of what schooling is for and what education means. The transformation towards a meaningful and relevant education is fundamental.

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