



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Imagining Inclusive Schooling:

Listening to Disabled Children's Voices in China

Key Lessons for Teachers | April 2017



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.

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This handbook is designed for teachers who would like to develop inclusive practice in their classrooms. The guidance provided is closely based on the research findings from the 'Imagining Inclusive Schooling' project. This handbook complements the summary report of the project and it includes exercises to help teachers reflect on their own practice. The dissemination is supported by the UK ESRC Global Challenges Research Fund Postdoctoral Fellowship.

1. The importance of inclusive practice

Although many countries have promoted the agenda of inclusive education in policy, it is a globally shared challenge to transform everyday practice in regular schools. The failure of doing so would lead to doubts over the feasibility of inclusion and the maintenance of segregated schooling.

What is inclusive practice? In China, it is a common issue for teachers to misunderstand the concept of inclusive practice as that of special educational practice. The latter is based on an idea that disabled children or other 'special' children could only be educated by ways that are completely different from what we do for the majority (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). The research findings from the 'Imagining Inclusive Schooling' project showed that adopting special educational practice in regular classrooms and schools had not been very helpful. The differentiation could instead make disabled children subject to experiences of marginalisation and exclusion.

Educational practice should not be treated as a purely technical issue – it is inherently social, cultural and political. Teachers need to make countless decisions about who gets what education how and where. The research found that what a disabled child encountered at school highly depended on individual teachers' practice. This handbook thus focuses on what classroom teachers can do for inclusion of all pupils. While it is important for the whole school to develop inclusive culture (recommendations for head teachers are included in another leaflet), teachers' agency should be recognised that they can make a real difference in children's lives.

Devising inclusive practice requires teachers to challenge the assumption that disabled children should be educated by special ways or 'specialists'. If we need to do something that is not about special treatment, what would it look like?
What have you done to promote every child's learning and participation and minimise the likelihood to marginalise some?

2. What children say about what teachers should and should not do

Internationally, there is a growing enthusiasm to draw on children's views and experiences to inform educational practice, to make education relevant, helpful and effective. When being heard, children would also feel more motivated to learn and participate. The group of disabled children in this research shared many valuable comments on their teachers' practices. These views must be taken into account by teachers to enhance these children's experiences of inclusion at school (children's responses are included in the brochure designed for pupils).

What should be continued

1) Ensure all children's opportunities to learn. Children mentioned how they wanted to be included in learning just as other pupils. For example, a child said that her favourite teacher would always include her when asking pupils to practice English dialogues, while another teacher would leave her out of such activity. Teachers should always make sure that all pupils are given equal chances to work on learning tasks. Children's access to necessary tools and materials should be guaranteed. Teachers need to be responsive by providing necessary tutoring.

When you were teaching, have you guaranteed that all pupils would have opportunities to participate in learning?

If you tended to exclude some children, what was the reason for such decision?

What could have been done differently to include everyone?

2) Ensure opportunities to take part in class and school activities. Children wanted to participate in all kinds of activities happening at school, such as contests, performances, field trips, looking after classrooms and becoming student cadres. Teachers should encourage and support children's participation in these activities rather than setting barriers. For the activities that are important to children's feelings of belongingness to a class community, teachers need to make sure that all children could play their part.

The matters that children care about might sound trivial to you.

Now please think about your own practice: Have you excluded any child from activities? Why? What could have been done differently?

3) High expectation for all. The research found that teachers with high expectations for every child including disabled children tended to create more opportunities for learning and participation. Children desired recognition of their wider range of achievements beyond academic attainments. Children liked being trusted to make choices – they often chose the more challenging learning tasks. Such teachers rarely set pre-determined limitations about what children could do. This ensured space for children to make progress in learning.

Have children surprised you in any way with their competence to learn and participate?

What can you do to make sure that you don't limit children's chances to achieve?

Do you give children sufficient choices? In your classroom, do you value and celebrate a wider range of achievements?

4) Quality teaching. Children welcomed teachers who could keep them interested. These teachers knew the subjects well and would make the materials relevant to children's real lives. Their instruction was engaging. It also requires teachers to manage the classroom well, because it would make some children feel hard to concentrate if other pupils were noisy.

What do you do to engage children in classroom learning to keep them interested?

Have you considered how to include all children when you were planning for a lesson?

5) Learning with and from children. Many children commented that they liked teachers who were humorous and who could have a laugh together with pupils. Children liked teachers who would consult them about practices, ask for feedbacks and acknowledge that there could be things that they can't do well. These teachers were supportive, approachable and respectful. By adapting their practices to what children wanted, children also tended to have better schooling experiences. They would also negotiate better interests for children when children were still not involved in the process of decision-making.

Do you recognise yourself as a learner? What have children taught you about? How did you consult children about your own practice? Have you included disabled children and how? If not, what's the reason for your decision? What were the challenges and what could you do to overcome these challenges?

6) Being fair to all. Children emphasised the importance of a teacher being fair to all pupils. In fact, they did not want to be privileged. They cared about and felt the same for other children. They liked teachers who would not yell at or punish pupils. When there were conflicts between them and other children, they wanted teachers to listen to their perspectives as well rather than silencing them.

How do you facilitate a sense of fairness in your classroom? When disabled children and other children had conflicts, what did you do? Have you heard all voices?

7) Supporting children to work together. Children highlighted how they valued the opportunities to learn together with their peers in groups and they hoped that teachers could make this happen more. Children also identified peers as one of the main sources of support at school. In an inclusive classroom, it seemed to be easier for a disabled child to seek help from other children.

Have you actively facilitated pupils' opportunities to support each other? When using the strategy of group-learning, what did you do to guarantee a positive experience for every child and avoid someone being marginalised?

What should be stopped

The children who participated in the research also revealed many problematic practices. Sometimes, teachers were not fully aware of the impacts of their practices. Teachers also felt that they had to make compromise because of structural barriers such as the extremely competitive education system.

1) Underestimating disabled children's competence. Children felt upset that their abilities were not recognised by teachers, and they were often marginalised in learning or asked to drop out from activities because of teachers' low expectation. Teachers might be convinced by medical and psychological perspectives about disabled children's inherent deficits. Children tended to internalise teachers' negative comments and started to withdraw from participating. Children also disliked it when teachers only allocated them super easy tasks that involved little learning at all. In fact, children's capacity to learn highly depended on what teachers did. Teachers need to be aware of how the assumption of children's low competence could restrict children's educational opportunities.

2) Excluding children from learning and participation. Maltreatment and ignorance towards disabled children was witnessed such as excluding them from classroom teaching and learning, moving them to segregated seats or classrooms and taking no actions to stop bullying. All children recalled their experiences of being bullied at school. Some children felt disappointed by teachers, and teachers tended to rationalise bullying as natural social interaction among children. More needs to be done to ensure that every child could feel safe and included at school. Children also faced discrimination and negative labelling effects when teachers marked them out as inferior to other pupils. Humiliating and undermining children in any form should not be allowed.

3) Tensions with families. Teachers need to recognise their roles in facilitating collaboration and cultivating positive relationships with other significant adults in children's lives. In the research, some teachers blamed parents' faults for children's difficulties, which was not helpful for developing a good family-school relationship. The tensions with parents could also make children feel more resentful towards teachers.

3. Examples

Below are a few real examples that were documented by the research. Please read them through and think about the following questions:

- What's going on here?
- What does the teacher do to promote or hinder inclusion?
- What's the impact of teachers' practice?
- How would children feel about what's happening?
- What can you learn from it?
- What could be done differently to include everyone?

Case 1

The learning objective for the art lesson is to do paper-cut. A basket of scissors is passed on one by one and every pupil would have a pair of scissors to use. Sitting at the back of the classroom, Rui is the last one to take over the basket. There is only a broken pair left. He starts to beg other pupils to lend their pairs but receives no help. He spends the whole lesson doing this. The teacher has not checked whether everyone was able to get on with the task. When it is almost the end of the lesson and most children have finished their work, Rui finally decides to 'steal' one pair from a girl when she leaves her desk temporarily. All other children except Rui have enjoyed the lesson a lot and the teacher takes a selfie with them celebrating the achievements. When the bell rings, he has not even finished half of the work.

Case 2

Some of the child participants were seated at 'special' seats in the classrooms. Two of them were seated at the back without any desk mate, which made it harder for them to take part in group learning. One child was seated in a separate group, which made him feel lonely and bored. His teacher was using this strategy to discipline some of the 'naughty' pupils. One child was constantly bullied by her desk mate, however, her teacher said that there was no other better choice because it was unfair for any child to sit next to her anyway.

Case 3

This is a lesson of nature science. Children go to the lab and sit in groups of 4 around big tables. Today's objective is to learn how to assemble circulars to light up a little bulb. The teacher, who is young and often puts on a smile, says that pupils have got two minutes to complete the task. Some groups finish the task very soon and pupils report to teachers full of excitement. Sha and Xi are in the same group with two other boys. The boys leave the manual work to the girls, only watching and offering suggestions. It is not an easy task for them. Sha turns to another group asking for help, and a girl wearing '2 bars' comes over to help. Time is up and the teacher asks pupils to stop. However, Sha and Xi are still busy trying. The teacher looks at them but she does not say anything, such as asking them to hurry up, which may draw other children's attention to the group. The teacher simply continues to compliment the children on how great they have performed, while keeping an eye on Sha's group. Finally, their bulb is lit up! Seeing this, the teacher promptly announces that all pupils have succeeded at the task. The following task is to re-light up the bulb and draw a picture of the circulars. The teacher hands out blank papers to each group and emphasises that all four members of a group should complete this task together. Sha's group struggles a bit but they get it done after a short while. Xi is in charge of drawing. The teacher asks another pupil to draw the correct one on the blackboard, and then gives pupils one minute to amend their drawings. Sha takes over the paper and continues to draw until she finishes. She is so thrilled. She jumps up and tells Xi and the other two boys: 'It's done!' For the third task, children are given two little bulbs and asked to figure out different ways of connecting the circulars. Xi firstly works on it before handing things over to a boy,

and he continues. They successfully light up two bulbs and they are laughing together so happily. It is a moment to celebrate achievement! Then Sha starts drawing. Now the lesson is nearing the end and everything quiets down. Sha and Xi lay their heads on the table, staring at the two shining little bulbs, with brightened eyes.

Case 4

A child was asked to not to take part in a singing performance which all other pupils from his class attended. The teacher explained that she did not allow him to be there because given his height, he would need to stand on stairs. She was worried that he might fall and put other pupils in danger. For another teacher, she said that although her pupil missed the rehearsal of a performance because the child was sick, she still considered it important to include her. The child thus was invited to be the person who introduced her classmates, so she could step onto the same stage.

Case 5

When commenting on listening to disabled children, a teacher said: 'So sometimes, if I am chatting with him (the child), it also means that I am feeling happy too. When I am chatting with other pupils, it is always about how you are getting on with your study. To tell you the truth, I have never had deep conversations with other pupils. I rarely talked with other pupils, like what's going on at your home. But I am very close to him. Maybe because I have talked a lot with him, we became close. I like chatting with him. When it comes to other pupils, it is always about stuff like study, study and study. I mean, as teachers, we would not feel much happiness in the heart if we keep doing this. I am more relaxed when I am talking with Wu. We can talk about everything and he can say anything. Anyway, it is very relaxing.'

Case 6

The teacher asks pupils to draw an equilateral triangle by using a compass and a ruler. He has already provided a demonstration. He asks pupils to follow the instruction. Wu (the child) soon finishes drawing and turns to the boy sitting at the left to teach him how to draw the triangle. The girl sitting behind the boy comes over and asks Wu to go back to his own seat. He moves back but later he goes to help the boy again. The teacher says: 'I think some of you have been telling lies. You ask for labor skill lessons everyday. When I really do it, your craft skills are so poor.' Wu soon finishes another one and he puts the pencil down. The teacher notices him and assumes that Wu refuses to do the task. He asks the pupils sitting near to Wu: 'He didn't draw?' The boy who was helped by Wu replies: 'He did, and he has finished it.' Pupils gather around to see Wu's drawing and start to make sounds out of admiration: 'Wow! Wow!' The teacher comes over and checks his work, then he says to the whole class: 'Look at you all! You are not even better than Wu. His drawing is as good as mine!'

4. How teachers make sense of their inclusive principles

Usually inclusive practice tends to be misrepresented as a 'check-list'. Such approach is unhelpful because it ignores how complex it could be for teachers to devise effective practice that is sensitive to local contexts. For teachers in this research who demonstrated inclusive practice, they were not 'perfect' in all situations – sometimes they could also marginalise children. Furthermore, many teachers felt that there was little time and space for them to get to know their pupils and explore what could be done to enhance inclusion. It is important to acknowledge such difficulty for teachers. It involves constant negotiation to make inclusion work. Besides drawing on external guidance, teachers need to become 'investigators' to find effective ways in their own classrooms and schools. Teachers in this research provided valuable insights into what had helped them to develop inclusive practice:

- What was common among inclusive teachers was their strong commitment to every pupil. Such commitment was part of their professional and moral values. Excluding children was recognised as unacceptable. They felt that they played important roles for children's educational outcomes.
- These teachers rarely blamed difficulties as the faults of children or their parents. Instead, they focused on their own professional development. They saw challenges as opportunities for improvement. They highlighted how they were reflective about their practices and how they kept trying different methods to find effective strategies.
- They stayed critical about the native impact of disability labels and showed high expectation for all pupils. They would not set limits to what a child was capable of, thus they were often surprised by children.

They paid great attention to how children experienced the provision. Through close observation and genuine dialogues, these teachers had good relationships with children and they would speak out to negotiate children's views with other adults. One teacher felt that she learned from children that beyond academic learning, learning about how to support each other and live together was also very important. She felt deeply grateful for children's supports of her work.

- They would also actively seek collaboration with colleagues and wider communities. They would learn from other teachers and work with parents. They emphasised the importance of positive relationships with school and community members.

Developing inclusive practice takes time and hard work. With the presence of disabled children in regular classrooms, all teachers in the research have been gradually changing their perceptions and beliefs about this group of children, which is indeed promising. Children who met inclusive teachers expressed their positive feelings about schooling. One girl felt that she belonged to the school and she would love to come back often to visit her teachers after graduation. After all, inclusive education is an issue that concerns what education means and what it is for.

Do you find these characteristics of inclusive teachers relevant? Are there other principles that you have found to be important? What are the challenges for you to develop inclusive practice? What's needed to better support your professional development for inclusion?

5. Toolkit: methods of listening to pupil voice

The research showed that by listening to children, teachers and schools could be better informed about what is needed to be done to facilitate inclusion. The research proposed a working model for teachers to develop inclusive practice (see the Summary Report). Listening involves both formal consultation and informal dialogues. In the process of listening, pupils should be respected as partners. It is extremely important to recognise children's competence and reaffirm the value of their views. For children with challenges in communication, teachers should consider giving more time, asking appropriate open and closed questions, avoiding repeating questions, asking about stories and accepting children's silence.

In the following, some of the popular methods that teachers could use to listen to children about their school lives are introduced. This research used methods of observation, photo-elicited interviews, 'guided tours', 'good/bad things about school' and 'seed in a pot'. The advantages and limitations of each method must be considered within the context of listening. Often a child would find some of the methods interesting and suitable but not others, thus teachers would need to stay flexible and adopt more individualised approaches when needed. Teachers should also consider the ethical issues. For example, private space would be needed when discussing with children around sensitive topics. All voices should be treated fairly. Actions must be taken upon children's voices.

Observation

Observation is a common method to make sense of children's behaviours and interactions with others. It is suitable for understanding children with profound or multiple learning difficulties (Ware, 2004). However, teachers should not only rely on observation because there could be risks of misinterpreting children's meanings and intentions (Ware, 2004).

Interview

Interview is also a frequently used method to learn about children's views and experiences. Prompts such as pictures can be used to facilitate interviewing. With younger children, puppets or role-playing can be used. Interview is likely to gain rich data and it is easier to be personalised. Interview could be open-ended, and it could also be structured or semi-structured to gain more focused information. Individual interview can provide privacy for children to talk about sensitive issues. The

limitation of interview is that it mainly relies on children's verbal skills which could make it unsuitable for some children (Gibson, 2012). It can also be time-consuming.

Good/bad things about school

Children are asked to list good or bad things about a school to help identify the facilitators and barriers to their learning and participation. It is quite straightforward and clearly focused. It offers structure to elicit children's views. Follow-up interviews are often needed.

Photography

Photography has gained its popularity in recent years. It can take the form as 'photovoice' – children take photos to capture their experiences and later review them. This method is accessible, fun and engaging (Stevens, 2010). It can be inclusive to children who lack verbal skills (Nind, 2008). It is led by children so they can be in charge of how they would like to represent themselves (Booth & Booth, 2003). Photos can also be used to facilitate communication in interviews (O'Brien, 2013) and stimulate reflection (Miles & Kaplan, 2005). Photos can support recalling of details such as events, people, places and feelings. However sometimes, photos taken by children might not be relevant for what teachers would like to focus on. Children might feel worried about their photography skills too (Barker & Weller, 2003).

Guided tours

Children are invited to take adults on a tour around places that are important to them or those that they do not like. Photos or videos might be taken to document the tour. This method respects children as the knowers. It is fun and engaging. Interviews can be carried out to seek more comments from children on why they like or dislike a place.

Seed in a pot

This method is similar to the idea of 'message in a bottle' or 'magic wand'. Children are asked to imagine what they want to change to make things better for them. It is effective to understand children's aspirations for improvement. However, it requires children to first understand the concept of the activity.

Questionnaire

Questionnaire is method that is common to use in schools. Children would be asked to fill in pre-designed questionnaires to evaluate their experiences and offer their opinions. Simple language, symbols and pictures can be used to make the content easier to understand. This method is usually cost-efficient to collect data from a large numbers of pupils. A questionnaire can collect direct and structured information (Mahbub, 2008). The downside of this method is that the depth and complexity of data tends to be limited. It might also constrain the diversity of responses. It can come across as being too abstract and disengaging for children.

Focus group

Teachers can organise focus groups to facilitate children's discussions around certain topics. By using this method, children might feel more relaxed because they were talking with their peers. Children could also stimulate each other's thoughts and jointly come up with responses (Snelgrove, 2005). The challenge is that some children might be subject to group pressure to give desirable responses. It also leaves little space for children to discuss personal issues. More articulate children might dominate the discussion which marginalises those who are less articulate (Woolfson et al., 2007).

Drawing

Children can be given topics to draw their experiences with people, events or places. Follow-up interview is often needed to understand children's rationale of their drawings. Drawing is an activity that children are very familiar with. Children's works can be creative and revealing. It is also suitable for children with learning difficulties (Porter, 2009). Nevertheless, children might copy other people's works. They may feel nervous about their artistic competence (Punch, 2002). It is not necessarily a fun activity for every child (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014).

Talking Mats

Talking Mats is a system that supports children with learning disabilities to demonstrate their preferences by arranging pictures, photos or symbols. It is easy for children to understand. It could significantly increase accessibility for children with severe intellectual impairments (Nind, 2008). However, it usually takes time to prepare suitable materials.

Diary

Children can keep records of their experiences of daily lives in diaries. It allows children to keep notes of their personal feelings. It could be productive in providing large amount of quality data (Barker & Weller, 2003). Nevertheless, this method requires strong commitment from children and it can be time-consuming for them.

Which two of the methods you would consider trying out to listen to your pupils? Why? Who are you going to listen to? Are there ethical issues involved? What are you going to do with children's views afterwards? Do you know that children could also be the investigators to research what's happening at school? They could formulate their own questions that they feel concerned about, choose methods such as interviewing other children and teachers, and analyse and present the results. Why don't you give it a try in your classroom?

You are very welcome to share with me about your experience of listening to pupil voice, and your thoughts about this handbook. Please drop me an email at:
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