



THE UNIVERSITY  
*of* EDINBURGH

Imagining Inclusive Schooling:

# Listening to Disabled Children's Voices in China

*Key Lessons for Families and NGOs | 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.

Yuchen Wang  
University of Edinburgh

In China, more and more organisations and families are joining the movement to campaign for disabled children's rights to access inclusive provision. This leaflet includes the key messages for families and NGOs on how to promote inclusive education for disabled children in China, complementing the summary report of the 'Imagining Inclusive Schooling' project. The dissemination is supported by the UK ESRC Global Challenges Research Fund Postdoctoral Fellowship.

## Key messages for families

1. The research found that families might not be fully informed about what's happening to their children in schools. Families could also have little say over important decisions regarding their children's opportunities to access learning and activities. Some families might feel pressured by schools to accept the less satisfying provision for their children. Overall, families are likely to be subject to unbalanced power relations. To improve such circumstance, families need to adopt an approach of active participation to make their voices heard.
2. It requires families to build up their knowledge of education for disabled children. Families need to become more aware of how professionals shape the idea about how and where disabled children should be educated. Families should work and negotiate with schools to ensure the best provision for children. The outcomes of schooling need to be better monitored.
3. Families could play important roles in educating children about their rights and how to do self-advocacy. Children's participation should be realised within the environment of a family. Families need to be aware of how over-protection could result in limited participation for children. The fear over stigma and shame associated with disability in Chinese society needs to be overcome.
4. In many countries, an alliance of families for disabled children often acts as the major force to push forward the agenda of inclusion. Collective action has the potential to make families feel empowered and supported to seek resources, collaborations and change that could benefit disabled children.

## Key messages for NGOs

1. It needs further work to advocate for disabled children's rights to inclusive and quality education. At present, the resistance towards the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream schools is evident. Incidents that harm or neglect this group of children still happen. NGOs need to continue to devise projects to challenge how disability is understood and facilitate self-advocacy. Better legal aid is needed to protect children's welfare.
2. It is seen that NGOs could also contribute to the process of policy-making. Besides policy consultation, more work is needed in specific areas such as children's voices and participation, the monitoring of children's educational outcomes, inclusive practice in schools and classrooms, and teacher education for inclusion.
3. Innovative and creative ways of hearing disabled children's voices could be adopted in projects. Advisory groups formed by disabled persons could also provide important guidance for an NGO's practice and ethics.
4. NGOs are essential to facilitate links and collaborations among multiple sectors and various groups of stakeholders. Social media can be an effective strategy for dissemination, networking and furthering impact.