

**PARENTS' AND SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES
OF IMPLEMENTING INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION IN P. R. CHINA
-AN EMPIRICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH**

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The purpose of this study was to explore the opinions and perspectives of special education teachers and parents of children in special education regarding the implementation of individualized instruction within the special education system in the People's Republic of China. The study group consisted of a random sample of 344 parents of children in special education and 100 special education teachers in Beijing. Valid and reliable questionnaires were developed. Analysis of data from questionnaires showed that special education teachers had a positive attitude towards utilizing and providing individualized instruction, but also had concerns. Analysis of data from parents' questionnaires showed that parents needed to learn to advocate for their children, wanted improved parent-teacher communication, but also had concerns. This study revealed potential barriers for implementing individualized instruction in China. American and Western educational programs and services may benefit the development of special education in China, but they need to be culturally sensitive and appropriate for the economic, social, and cultural realities and individualized and localized to China and its education system. Challenges and difficulties in the process of implementing specific imported educational programs should be addressed. Recognition of and attention to parents and special education teachers' responses will assist Chinese colleagues, politicians, and school leaders in this process.

Individualized instruction for children with disabilities in the schools has long been advocated in the United States (Meyen, 1995). Only since the 1990's has there been a focus on individualized instruction in the special education system of China. Many Chinese researchers and educators (e.g., Xiao and Liu, 1996) have stated that individualized instruction has better educational outcomes than traditional group instruction. However, they have not always had empirical support for their statements and the implementation of individualized instruction in China has encountered some challenges. Additional support for such an approach is needed if legislation to mandate such services is to occur.

It is difficult to arrive at a precise definition of individualized instruction, which would satisfy all educators. A general emphasis rooted in individualized instruction is to match student needs to instructional options with concern for adapting resources by altering the instructional environment (Meyen, 1995). In 1975, The *Education of All Handicapped Children Act* (PL 94-142) was passed in the United States. This law and its various reauthorizations (e.g., IDEA, 2004) guarantee that all children with disabilities have the access to a free and appropriate public education. Thus, the American education system is striving to ensure that all children receive an education that is appropriate for their level of functioning.

Individualized instruction is not a new concept in China, however, a large-scale introduction and learning of individualized instruction has not been evidenced until the end of the Cultural Revolution in China (Ding, 1997). In Ding's (1997) review of individualized instruction in China, several innovative education approaches in China were presented. Following the Cultural Revolution, the policy of *classifying students based on their abilities* had been implemented for years, but it was terminated in 1982, due to the negative impacts on students who were significantly below the average level in ability. The model of *mastery learning* developed by Benjamin S. Bloom was implemented in Lin Hu District Central Elementary School during the 1987-1988 academic year (Wu, 1989). In 1991, a program aimed at developing students' individual academic interest was implemented at Shanghai Tan Wan Central Elementary School. Comparison of students' pretest and posttest grades predicted positive outcomes (He & Gu, 1997). However, most of these empirical studies of individual instruction focused on children with an average level of intellectual ability.

The theoretical orientation of individualized instruction for populations with special needs has been gradually introduced to China. Over the past two decades, increasing attention has been given to individualized instruction in terms of research, training, and implementation for exceptional learners. Xiao and Liu (1996) systematically introduced the theories, functions, and implementation of individualized instruction used in the United States to China. Xiao and Liu (1996) also focused on the implementation of individualized instruction for students with mental retardation. In Liu's (1996) work, he described the historical and legislative issues of the individualized education plan (IEP) in the United States, compared and contrasted the differences between the U. S. education system and the China education system, and advocated for future study of the Chinese efforts on application of IEP. Xiao and Wang (2000) introduced Individually Prescribed Instruction (IPI), Individually Guided Education (IGE), Program for Learning in Accordance with Needs (project PLAN), etc. Xiao and Wang (2000) stated that the idea of individualized instruction should be perceived as a theoretical and innovative orientation, which might promote the educational reform of the traditional group-instruction in the special education system of China.

A similar development of theoretical approaches to individualized instruction has taken place in Taiwan. For example, in Huang's (1996) edited book, *Individualized Instruction*, a variety of individualized instruction models, which were primarily developed by European and American scholars and educator are summarized. The text emphasizes the general educational theories and methodologies of individualized instruction and provides specific strategies to assist the educators in using individualized instruction across different subjects. In addition, Lin (1999) introduced a comprehensive procedure for developing an IEP and provided specific recommendations for implementing IEPs.

Researchers and educators in China and Taiwan have made great strides in translating, introducing, and advocating the theories and models of individualized instruction from the United States and other Western countries (Huang, 1996). However, up to the present time, little is known how parents and special education teachers perceive and accept the idea and implementation of individualized instruction. This study explored parents and special education teachers' perspectives regarding the implementation of individualized instruction in local special education schools. In so doing it revealed potential barriers to implementing individualized instruction in China. In comparing the differences between the U.S. and China education systems, it made recommendations and suggestions for future study of individualized instruction in China.

Method

Participants and Setting

Participating in this study were 400 parents of students with disabilities from 4 randomly selected urban special education schools in Beijing; 344 questionnaires of the 400 sent were identified as valid. Of the valid parent questionnaires, 24.4% of the parent participants had

college or graduate degrees; 44.2% had high school diplomas; and the remainder had at least an elementary or above. Teachers' questionnaires were collected from 103 voluntary special education teachers; 100 out of 103 questionnaires were identified as valid. Among the valid teachers' questionnaires, 55% of them had college or associate degrees, and 45% had professional training in special education. In addition, 59% of teachers had worked more than 6 years and 23% had less than two years of teaching experience.

Instruments

As part of the study a parent questionnaire was developed to examine possible factors that may have impacted the implementation of individualized instruction in China. The major factors included: (1) parents' understanding and perspectives towards individualized instruction; (2) parents' evaluation of current special education in China; (3) parents' attitudes towards special education teachers' qualification and expertise in implementing individualized instruction; and (4) parents' perspectives of home-school communication and cooperation.

In addition, the teachers' questionnaire was constructed to explore: (1) the special education teachers' perspectives towards individualized instruction; (2) the possible challenges that teachers have encountered or may encounter in the process of implementing individualized instruction; and (3) teachers' understanding of current special education procedures in China. All questionnaires included demographic questions were hand-written answers, multiple choice, and questions in the Liker scale format. Critical reviews of the questionnaire were by two experts in the Department of Special Education at the Beijing Normal University and three experienced special education teachers. The final instruments were field-tested using 5 special education teachers and 5 parents of children with mental retardation. Analysis of the data conducted by using descriptive statistics, t-test, one-way ANOVA, and chi-square.

Results

The results will be presented for each research question or combined for parents and teachers when the questions were the same.

Parents' and Special Education Teachers' Understanding of Individualized Instruction

Individualized instruction was viewed as the same as individual instruction by 13.4% of the parents. Basic understanding and knowledge of individualized instruction was demonstrated by 24.1% of the parents with 62.5% demonstrating an accurate understanding. The majority (79%) of the teacher participants showed accurate understanding; 7% of them believed that there was no difference between individualized instruction and individual instruction.

Table 1 shows that although 67.6% of the parents reported that individualized instruction could promote their children learning, only 22.2% of them believed that individualized instruction should be a mandatory requirement for their children's education. We hypothesized that Chinese parents had limited exposure to and understanding of individualized instruction utilized in developed countries, even though they had a positive attitude towards it.

Table 1
Parents' and Teachers' Overall Impression of Individualized Instruction

Items	Percentage saying "true"	
	Parents' Feedback	Teachers' Feedback
It will promote better learning.	67.6%	
It should be mandatory for special education.	22.2%	
It will produce better education outcomes.		93%
It will compensate for limitations of group instruction.		51%
It is ideal, but hard to be implemented.		21%

(It= individualized instruction)

The majority (93%) of the teachers reported positive attitudes towards individualized instruction; 51% of them believed that individualized instruction could compensate for the

limitations of group instruction. It is important to note that 21% of the teachers believed that it was challenging to implement individualized instruction in China.

Several similar questions were designed to explore the differences between parents' and teachers' attitudes and understanding of individualized instruction. In terms of the definition of individualized instruction, teachers demonstrated more accurate understanding than parents did. In addition, teachers displayed more advanced desire to individualize the instruction than parents did (Table 2).

Parents' and Teachers' Evaluation of Current Special Education in China

Approximately one-fifth (21.6%) of the parents reported that current instruction was not appropriate for their children; 17.8% of them advocated the improvement of the teacher training; and approximately 30% of them believed that teachers were overwhelmed by their current work. Half (49.9%) of the parents demonstrated a strong need to gain access to teachers' extended support for their children's education and 60.9% of them wanted to gain access to knowing more about their children's occupational development. We hypothesized that the home-school communication may play an important role in family education and may provide resources for parents to develop their children's occupational skills. In addition, there

Table 2

Comparison of Parents' and Teachers' Responses to Questions About Individualized Instruction

Items	Parents (n=344)		Teachers (n=10)		T Test	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	2-Tailed Sig
Individualized Instruction is ... (multiple choices)	2.45	0.829	2.70	0.659	- 3.114	0.002***
Pace of instruction within a class should be uniform.	2.50	1.498	3.80	1.119	- 9.403	0.000***
Students in the same class should be given the same test.	2.24	1.392	3.63	1.331	- 8.880	0.000***

($P < 0.05^*$, $P < 0.01^{**}$, $P < 0.001^{***}$; Questions were in a multiple-choice format or in a liker scale.)

are 33.2 % of the parents advocated an education reform within the special education system. By applying a chi-square test, parents with different education levels demonstrated significant discrepancy in evaluating current special education instruction, teachers' workload, and supervision of teachers' improvement of instruction (Table 3).

Table 3

Parents' Attitudes towards Current Special Education

Items	Percentage saying "true"	Chi-Square/Sig.
Current instruction is appropriate.	21.6%	13.913/0.008**
Instruction methods need to be improved.	18.66%	9.076/0.059
Teachers' qualification has to be desired.	17.8%	6.094/0.192
Teachers are overwhelmed by their current work.	27.4%	12.817/0.012*
Teacher-centered philosophy dominates special education.	4%	4.841/0.304
School managers should supervise teachers' instruction improvement.	14.3%	10.679/0.030*
Government should make more efforts for education reform.	33.2%	6.437/0.169
More communication with others should be desired.	19.8%	7.338/0.119
Teachers should provide more assistance for parents.	49.9%	2.507/0.643
Acknowledging more about children's career development is necessary.	60.9%	8.821/0.066

(Questions were designed in a multiple choice format.)

The survey of teachers focused on the specific challenges that occurred in the existing special education system. About three-fifth (61%) of the teachers agreed that the discrepancy between students placed them at a very challenging position guarantee an appropriate education for each student. Three-fourths of the teachers desired an education reform of current instruction and 41% of them reported that they were overwhelmed by their work and

not satisfied by their current payment. Teachers with different education levels did not show significant difference in evaluating current special education (Table 4).

Table 4
Teachers' Attitudes towards Current Special Education

Items	Percentage	Chi-Square/Sig
The discrepancy between students is significant.	61%	2.336/0.311
Instruction reform is warranted.	75%	0.353/0.838
Workload is heavy and payment needs to be improved.	41%	0.182/0.913

(Questions were in a multiple choice format.)

There was a significant difference (0.000***, χ^2 test) between teachers' desire for education reform in instruction and parents' desire for education reform. We hypothesized that teachers worked within the special education system and were more aware of the limitations of current instruction than were parents (Table 5).

Table 5
Comparison of Parents' and Teachers' Desire for Education Reform

Item	Parents (n=344)		Teachers (n=100)		Chi-Square
	M	SD	M	SD	
The government should increase the impact on education reform.	0.34	0.48	0.76	0.43	0.000***

Teachers' Perspectives of the Barriers of Implementing Individualized Instruction

China's education law has not guaranteed individualized instruction yet, and approximately half of the teachers believed that a legislative guarantee is warranted. A strong support (74%) revealed teachers' need to gain access to preservice and inservice professional training regarding individualized instruction. Individualized instruction is not a well-developed methodology in China and it was possible that most special teachers merely heard about this idea, but lacked experiences to apply it (Table 6).

Table 6
Teachers' Reports of Barriers to Implement Individualized Instruction

Items	Percentage	Chi-Square/Sig
Legislative guarantee is warranted.	43%	0.241/0.886
Preservice and in-service training are desired.	74%	4.741/0.093
Schools should provide teaching assistants.	60%	2.127/0.345
Teachers need more independence to modify instruction.	44%	6.512/0.039*
Parents may provide after-school assistance and relieve teachers' workload.	50%	0.431/0.806

(Questions were in a multiple choice format.)

Three-fifth of the teachers reported the need to gain the access to assistance from teacher associates or assistants. In addition, half of the teachers reported the desire to gain assistance from parents. Compared with the special education system in the United States, special education in China was equipped with uniformed instruction textbooks and assigned instructional outlines, which were designed by the Department of Education in China. Approximately half of the teachers wanted to gain more independence of modifying the instruction to meet specific individuals' needs, which revealed that the highly uniformed and structured instruction did not guarantee an appropriate education. Based on their educational level, the teachers varied in their desire to have more independence in modifying instruction to meet specific individuals' needs. Teachers with higher education level demonstrated more need for independence to modify instruction (Table 6).

Parents' Evaluation of Special Education Teachers

Generally, the majority of the parents reported positive or neutral attitudes towards teachers' professional training, organization skills, and professional spirit. However, approximately 30% of the parents worried about the extended support and resources for teachers'

professional development. In other words, the availability of resources and professional support might have a significant impact of educational outcomes, even though teachers' overall qualifications were not a big concern. Meanwhile, 23.6% parents reported that the teachers had little independence to accommodate the instruction, which corresponded to teachers' self-report (Table 7).

Table 7
Parents' Evaluation of Special Education Teachers

	Excellent	Adequate	Average	Not Adequate	Poor	Mean/SD
Teachers' Education	15.5%	31.8%	39.4%	13.1%	0.3%	1.51/0.917
Teachers' Organization Skills	15.5%	33.5%	40.2%	10.5%	0.3%	1.47/0.887
Teachers' Professional Spirit	17.2%	46.9%	26.8%	8.2%	0.9%	1.29/0.875
Resources and Help	30.3%	14.3%	25.1%	25.7%	4.7%	1.63/1.400
Teaching Independence	29.4%	17.5%	29.4%	21.0%	2.6%	1.50/1.206
Teachers' Qualification	13.4%	24.7%	45.8%	12.5%	3.5%	1.68/0.974

(Note: Weights of "0", "1", "2", "3", and "4" correspond to the categories of "excellent", "adequate", "average", "not adequate", and "poor".)

Teachers' Attitude of Implementing individualized instruction

Strong support (92%) by teachers was given to the implementation of individualized instruction. However, approximately 40% of the teachers demonstrated dissatisfaction of current group-instruction within the special education system. The majority (78%) of the teachers disagreed with utilizing uniformed examination system to evaluate special education students (Table 8). By utilizing Oneway ANOVA, teachers' with different education backgrounds did not demonstrate significant differences in terms of their attitudes towards implementing individualized instruction.

Table 8
Teachers' Attitude towards Individualized Instruction and Current Special Education

Items	Most Likely	Likely	Neutral	Unlikely	Most Unlikely	Mean/SD
II is possible to implement.	51%	36%	6%	4%	3%	1.54/0.989
We should implement II.	58%	34%	2%	5%	1%	1.52/0.785
II is similar to GI.	10%	8%	13%	42%	27%	3.65/1.313
GI satisfies educational goals.	11%	17%	34%	32%	6%	2.45/1.274
SE has good outcomes.	2%	30%	24%	34%	10%	2.95/1.175
Instruction pace should be unified.	5%	9%	5%	60%	21%	3.63/1.331
Tests should be unified.	5%	13%	4%	50%	28%	3.05/1.132

(Note: Weights of "0", "1", "2", "3", and "4" are correspondent to the categories of "most likely", "likely", "neutral", "unlikely", and "most unlikely". II=Individualized Instruction, GI=Group Instruction, SE=Special Education)

Teachers' Attitudes towards Current Educational Policies and Teacher Training

Two-fifth of the teachers believed that current educational policies encouraged teachers to implement individualized instruction, however almost half of them demonstrated desire to gain the access to teaching assistants and other support to assist them implement the idea of individualized instruction in real world. About half (44%) of the teachers reported the need to

Table 9
Teachers' Attitudes towards Current Educational Policies and Teacher Training

Items	Most Likely	Likely	Neutral	Unlikely	Most Unlikely	Mean/MD
Education policy encourages utilizing II.	3%	37%	47%	9%	4%	1.64/0.847
Teaching assistants are warranted.	3%	43%	47%	6%	1%	1.59/0.698
Teachers should voice their options and suggestions towards instruction.	4%	40%	53%	3%	0%	1.55/0.626
Comprehensive evaluation system is necessary for II.	4%	42%	45%	8%	1%	1.60/0.739

voice their opinions and suggestion about instruction and school reform. In addition, approximately half of the teachers believed that a comprehensive evaluation system is warranted for implementing individualized instruction (Table 9).

Parent Participation and Home-School Communication

Parents indicated moderate support (50.9%) of the access to participation in their children's education and school administration. A moderate support (62.5%) indicated parents' desire to communicate and cooperate with teachers. Approximately half (44.8%) of the parents liked to provide assistance for teachers, which may relieve teacher's workload. It showed that 37.8% parents demonstrated parents' desire to voice their suggestion and the access to have an impact on their children's formal education. Utilizing chi-square test, parents with different education levels revealed significant difference (0.016*) in terms of giving suggestions and having impact on school education. Parents with lower level of education demonstrated high level of desire than parents with higher level of education (Table 10).

Table 10
Parents' Attitudes towards Home-school Communication

Items	Most Likely	Likely	Neutral	Unlikely	Most Unlikely	Mean/MD	Sig.
Parents have the right to participate in children's education and school administration.	9.3%	41.6%	38.4%	8.7%	1.7%	1.52/0.847	0.028
Parents should communicate and cooperate with teachers.	14.0%	48.5%	29.1%	4.7%	3.5%	1.35/0.912	0.142
Parents may function as teaching assistants.	14.0%	30.8%	36%	14%	5.0%	1.66/1.067	0.319
Parents should voice their suggestion and have an impact on school education.	15.1%	22.7%	42.2%	16.6%	3.2%	1.70/1.028	0.016*

Interpretation and Discussion of the Findings

This survey revealed parents' and special education teachers' attitudes regarding current special education and the implementation of individualized instruction in China. The interpretation of the reported concerns follows.

Parents' attitudes towards current special education

A number of parents reported that they believed that the current special education instruction did not meet their children needs and that there was a need for education reform. An obvious limitation of the current special education curriculum in China is its inflexibility. Most of the special schools utilize a uniform curriculum and teachers are required to follow the curriculum outlines, which were designed by the Department of Education of China. Without taking into account of the special education children's individual needs and the characteristics of local schools, the uniform curriculum used nationwide could produce instructional challenges for teachers who want to meet children's needs. In addition, some uniform textbooks may not be appropriate for developing the occupational skills of children who are mentally retarded.

A small portion of parents indicated that there was need to improve teacher's overall skills and teaching methods. In most Asian countries, teaching is perceived as a serious process and the most common form of teaching is lecturing. A variety of teaching techniques (e.g., group discussion, peer tutoring, instruction with the technological assistance) may be best in helping teachers motivate their students to work on tasks.

In Beijing, it is not surprising to see a special education teacher simultaneously teach 10-14 exceptional students without a teacher associate or assistant. Compared with special education teachers in the United States, who usually have access to assistance from other school personnel, Chinese special education teachers tend to be exhausted by their instruction and

class management routine. Moving to an individualized instruction model appears to be impossible, without extended assistance. According to the history of educational reform movement in the United States or other European countries, political impact and legislation play an important role in promoting appropriate education for students with disabilities. For example, in the United States, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) acts as an education law that was enacted to ensure equal educational opportunities and high expectations for students with disabilities. Approximately one third of the parents indicated that there was a need for a special educational reform, which would be advocated by the government. In other words, intensive political impact and a guarantee in education law is necessary for the modification or reform of current special education in China.

The parents' desire for support from other parents demonstrates that communication and interaction between parents is not well developed. In the United States, parent associations play a crucial role in advocating special education students' education and services. However, Chinese parents with children who have disabilities have limited communication and interaction with each other. Mental retardation is a condition that results in pain and bewilderment in many families. Most parents with children who have mental retardation lack extended support from other parents, community, etc. There are a few parent associations for exceptional learners in China; however, the functions of these associations are not well developed. More than half of the parents also expressed a need to focus more on their children's career development. They currently lack access to adequate occupational guidance to assist their children. Limited home-school communication may contribute to the parents' concern. Although most Chinese parents are invited to participate in teacher-parent conferences on a semester basis, more frequent communication should be promoted in order to keep parents informed about their access to extended resources and assistance from school and local education agencies.

Teachers' attitudes towards current special education

The majority of the students from these four special education schools were students with mild and moderate mental retardation and they were usually placed in classrooms for children with educable and trainable mental retardation. However, the large teacher: student ratio, such as 1/10, places these special education teachers in a position to encounter failure. An assumption of group instruction is that the learners demonstrate similar cognitive functioning and have similar learning skills. The significant discrepancy between these students' cognitive development (e.g., thinking, problem solving), learning style, attention span, etc. makes group instruction inappropriate for much of the instruction. Most of the special education teachers realized the limitations in the current curriculum, instruction techniques, and supporting services.

Compared with American special education teachers, Chinese special education teachers have very limited independence to modify the curriculum since the Department of Education of China determines the national curricula. In addition, the curriculum must be conducted based on the curriculum outlines, which are distributed by the Department of Education. In other words, the curriculum and its delivery are mandated by outside personnel and very limited adjustment/modification is allowed.

At least 41% of the special education teachers have concerns about their pay and workload, since their salary is usually lower than the average salary for regular education teachers (Ashman, 1995). Low salaries may play a crucial role in motivating teachers to do a good job. In China, general education and special education have been perceived as separate systems and they are funded by different sources. Fewer financial supports are allocated to special education; therefore, fewer teachers are attracted to the special education system.

Parents' Perspectives Towards Individualized Instruction

Strong parental support (67.6%) for individualized instruction indicated that parents have realized the limitations of current group-instruction and believe that individualizing the instruction to meet students' needs would produce better educational outcomes. Over 60% of the parents believe that it is very likely or likely that parents should communicate and cooperate with teachers which might release teachers from certain kinds of routine tasks. For example, parents might volunteer to provide supervision for their children's after-school care, offer help for their children's assignment and homework, and act as teacher assistants when the lead teacher wants to provide individualized instruction to a student.

In terms of individualizing students' learning, parents' feedback and suggestion might provide teachers with valuable information to modify the curriculum. Parents are always the first teachers of their children and understand the strengths and weaknesses of their children. Therefore, communication and interaction between parents and teachers may help teachers and parents to work together to modify instruction or educational expectations to fit each child's need. The majority of parents reported positive attitudes towards special education teachers' expertise. However, they reported concerns that the teachers may not have the professional training and resources they need to implement individualized instruction successfully.

Teachers' Perspectives Towards Individualized Instruction

The teachers reported strong support for utilizing individualized instruction. However, they also had specific concerns about implementing it in real world. One half of the teachers indicated a need to modify the current curriculum. A very large number of teachers (74%) displayed concerns about implementing individualized instruction, due to their limited exposure to specific knowledge and training in individualized instruction. In the United States, every student with a disability must receive services under IDEA and must have an individualized education plan. This is a vital document because it contains key information about the student and the special education and related services he or she needs. However, individualized instruction for children with disabilities has not been guaranteed by related education legislation in China. Teachers believe that the implementation of individualized instruction in China require progress in legislation and governmental advocacy.

During the procedure of developing an IEP, it is mandatory that a team of people, including the student's parents and school professionals, write the IEP. The parent involvement in disabled students' education has not been guaranteed by legal documentation in China. However, though school systems have strived for improving home-school communication. This survey revealed that many special education teachers desire to cooperate with parents and improve parent involvement in the procedures for individualizing students' curriculum. It is known that an IEP for each exceptional student in the United States should be developed or reviewed annually. A systematic and consistent evaluation or review is an important component to update student's special education and related services. We found that about half of the teacher desired an evaluation/review system to supervise the implementation of individualized instruction.

A Comparison of the Education System in China and the United States

Beyond the survey, the researchers believe that the significant differences between the education systems of China and the United States have made it difficult for the special education teachers in China to carry out individualized instruction. An understanding of the educational differences related to the culture, politics, and social expectation may be beneficial to Chinese special education teachers when they attempt to modify the individualized instruction models rooted in the United States. Based on the understanding and experiences of working in special education systems both in the United States and China, the major cultural and social differences between these two countries are highlighted below:

Learner-centered vs. Knowledge-centered

A learner-centered educational philosophy has played an important role in American education reforms (Bransford et al., 2000). The learner-centered environment emphasizes knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs that the learners bring to the educational setting and integrates them into the learning process. Therefore, the occurrence of individualized instruction corresponds to the need to make sure materials match exceptional students' specific cognitive or physical functioning. Both general and special education systems in China have deep roots in knowledge-centered education. Generally, knowledge-centered environments focus on promoting students' knowledge acquisition and helping students understand the content in existing interaction. However, pure knowledge instruction may result in an under-development of exceptional students' personal needs. A combination of learner-centered and knowledge-centered educational philosophies may contribute to the improvement of education and services for Chinese students with special needs.

Teacher Training and Resources of Other Professionals

The United States plays a leadership role in both general education and special education. Every special education teacher in the United States is required to have a college degree and receive temporary or regular certification. Most special education classrooms have smaller teacher: student ratio, which make it easier for the teachers to modify or individualize the curriculum. The assistance from other professionals or teaching assistants has become a necessary component of current special education in the United States. In China, a significant discrepancy in special education teacher's qualifications occurs in urban and rural areas. Generally, urban special education teachers have a higher educational background than rural special education teachers. However, in terms of educational background, there is a significant discrepancy between Chinese and American special education teachers. Therefore, in-service training or workshops will be an important addition for Chinese special education teachers to improve their professional expertise.

In addition, different special education professionals, such as speech pathologists, school psychologists, occupational therapists, etc., provide American special education teachers with access to different professional resources. In China, the limited professional support from different special education personnel has made education even more challenging for special education teachers. A number of responsibilities that should be given to other professionals are usually assigned to special education teachers. In addition, the limited number of associates or teaching assistants has made individualized instruction extremely hard to implement in a classroom with a large teacher: student ratio. The development of a team of professional personnel and teaching associates/assistants may partially relieve Chinese special education teachers from overloaded educational routines. Rural special education teachers need more attention and support from local education agencies.

Flexible Curriculum vs. Uniformed Curriculum

Individualized instruction requires a flexible curriculum system, which can be modified to meet students' special needs. In the United States, textbooks and curriculum are usually determined by local schools or local education agencies, which take into account their own local circumstances; recognize the requirements of their students and community; and meet the needs and expectation of all learners. In China, a uniform curriculum has been utilized across the country for several decades, except in experimental schools that have a specific aim. The original aim of unifying curriculum across the country is to standardize the instruction and make it easier to supervise the national elementary and secondary curricula. However, a uniform curriculum may lack the flexibility to fit the needs of students with disabilities, due to their diverse cognitive functioning and learning styles. Redesigning or modifying the curricula may meet the needs of exceptional learners.

Comparison of Parent Advocacy Movement and Parent Involvement

Special education programs throughout the United States resulted from a bottom up approach. They were initiated by parents of children with disabilities who provided leverage in the communities and states, then litigation, and finally federal legislation to ensure that every child with a disability received access to appropriate educational services. American parents have always led the fight for better services for their children (Heward, 2003). They have always been in the forefront of change, often nudging and promoting the professionals along with them. Parents across the country were making connections with one another. With American parents' efforts, changes have occurred in many areas that have improved the lives of children and adults with disabilities and their families. Chinese parents have realized the need to ask for better systems of service for children with disabilities. However, underdeveloped parent associations and lack of cooperation among parents have led to fragmented efforts. Along with the fast-developing economy in China, increasingly families have been making more efforts to advocate for improving education and related services for their children. Forming alliances or coalitions with organizations for exceptional individuals may be an effective way for parents to cooperate with one another. An advanced and consistent parent advocacy movement may accelerate the pace of special education reform in China. It is important to remember that the *Education for All Handicapped Children's Act* (PL94-142, 1975) guaranteed parent participation in nearly all phases of the special education planning process (Simpson, 1990). However, there is no clear guarantee of parent involvement in the *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China*.

Comparison of the Legislation Impact

American federal legislation on disabilities has played an important role in advocating the rights for exceptional learners. The *1964 Civil Rights* legislation made American parents think about the need for civil rights protection for people with disabilities. *Sections 503 and 504 of the Rehabilitation Act* became law in 1973, which extended basic civil rights to qualified individuals with disabilities in federally assisted (public) programs. In 1975, P. L. 94-142, the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (now the IDEA) was passed, which was developed with input from parents and professionals. It opened the doors of the public school system to all children with disabilities. In addition, it acknowledged the need for parental involvement in order to maximize the benefits of education.

Similarly, legislative mandates have accelerated the development of special education in China. For example, the *Resolution on the Reform of the School System* was published in 1951 and required education for children, youth, and adults with disabilities (cited in Year-Book of Education in China 1949-1981, 1984, p. 385). In the 1980s and 1990s, *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (1986) and *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Disabled Persons* (1990) were passed, both of which guarantee a free education for individuals with disabilities. However, neither of the above laws guarantees an appropriate education or an individualized education plan to each exceptional student. Li and Altman (1997) argued that the China Compulsory Education Law is basically a civil rights law, rather than a program law, which should include specific programmatic stipulations.

Limitations and Recommendations

While this is the first study to investigate the perspectives of Chinese parents of children with disabilities and special education teachers' towards implementing individualized instruction in China, there are several limitations of the study that warrant further discussion. Our sample was limited to parents and special education teachers from 4 urban special education schools in the City of Beijing in China. It is unknown whether the characteristics of parents and special education teachers from this region might be shared by samples from other regions in China. Thus the generalization of these findings to other areas in China should be done with caution. Future research should explore the perspectives of Chinese parents and special education teachers in other urban and rural areas as well.

Secondly, the differences between the American education system and China education system were addressed by the authors' understanding and observation of the educational systems in both countries. This discussion is also limited. Further study should address the discrepancy of the educational systems in the U.S. and China by implementing cross-cultural comparisons.

The researchers believe that the recognition and understanding of parents and special education teachers' perspectives towards individualized instruction warrant further attention and study. Government and public agencies, which fail to recognize parents and teachers' concerns, may fail to provide assistance and intervention in accelerating the pace of education reform in China.

In conclusion, education reform and programs that are implemented successfully in developed countries do not guarantee the same successful outcomes in countries that have a very different economy and culture. American and Western education programs and services may serve as a model of special education in China, but the transfer needs to be culturally sensitive and appropriate for the economic, social, and cultural realities, which individualize and localize China and its educational system. Challenges and difficulties in the process of implementing specific imported educational programs should be addressed. Recognition of and attention to parents and special education teachers' responses will assist Chinese colleagues, politicians, and school leaders in learning from the successes and failures.

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