

COMPARING SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA

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Despite the fact that China has a deep-rooted history of sympathetic attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, and has begun to serve individuals with disabilities in their public schools, Special Education in China today is much like it was in the United States prior to the implementation of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975. China has little of the uniformity that is evident in special education programs across the United States. This paper compares special education as it is implemented in these two nations. A survey is conducted to ascertain the support that teachers in these countries receive for teaching struggling students.

Introduction

There is little doubt that the United States and China are two of the most powerful and progressive countries in the world today. But, as far as Special Education is concerned, the United States serves as a model for other countries.

Special Education in China

Special education in China is quite similar to that of the United States prior to the implementing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL. 94-142) in 1975. There is a lack of consistency, not only in comparing urban and rural services, but within cities as well (Kritzer, 2011).

There were some important laws that have influenced the evolution of special education in China. In 1982, the newly revised constitution of China stated the country's responsibility for educating people with disabilities, the first legal mandate for the provision of special education in China. However, the firm foundation did not come until the National People's Congress adopted the 1986 Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China (Worrell & Taber, 2009), mandating that *all* children are entitled to nine years of free public education— six years of elementary education and three years of secondary school education.. Special schools were organized for children with visual, hearing and mental impairments. In 1990, the Law on the Protection of the Disabled Persons (1990) emphasized that families, work units and community organizations must share the responsibility for caring for individuals with disabilities. In 1994, this law was strengthened by the *Ordinance of Educations for Persons with Disabilities* which required a qualification certificate system for the special education teacher (Deng & Harris, 2008). Furthermore, the Teachers' Law of the People's Republic of China (1993), and the Education Law of the People's Republic of China (1995) both call for offering educational undertakings for individuals with disabilities.

China is attempting to do much more, compared to their past history, in the way of educating children with disabilities. China recognizes six classes of disability: visual, hearing, intellectual, physical, psychiatric and multiple impairments. Surprisingly, the prevalence of people with disabilities appears to be lower in China than other countries (Worrell & Taber, 2009). However, this difference might be due to the fact that China does not recognize all of the categories of disability that other countries do (Deng & Harris, 2008). In addition, China is an agriculturally based culture and the majority of people live in rural areas. Physical labor is the primary work in these rural areas where people can function productively even if they cannot read or write. Therefore, many people with disabilities (e.g. autism, learning disabilities, and mental retardation) may not even attend school in rural and remote areas (Worrell & Taber, 2009).

Because most of China's population lives in rural areas, the cost of funding special schools for most children with disabilities in these areas is quite prohibitive. Influenced by inclusion in western countries, the *Learning in the Regular Classroom* (LRC) movement gained popularity in the early 1990s (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007). The use of this setting to serve students with disabilities has grown astronomically. In 1990, there were 105,000 students with disabilities in school and about 18% of them were placed in general education classrooms. In 2003, LRC programs served approximately 67% of all students identified with disabilities in regular schools (Deng & Harris, 2008).

Children with disabilities are now welcome in Chinese general education classrooms; however, results are at best mixed. Eligibility for the LRC placements are for those students who can adapt to studies and life in public schools (Worrell & Taber, 2009). At present, three categories of disability are being served in the regular education setting: visually impaired, hearing impaired, and mental retarded. The most notable achievement made by China's LRC programs is the significant increase in numbers of children enrolled (Worrell & Taber, 2009).

Still, China has several major hurdles to overcome. First is the reality of large class sizes. Typically classes have between 50-70 students thus making it extremely difficult to individualize instruction for those students who need it. Additionally, teacher training is problematic as well. Many teachers in ordinary schools have never had training in special education (Worrell & Taber, 2009). Students with disabilities are often ignored in the classroom and may not receive appropriate instruction, because the teachers have neither enough time nor adequate knowledge and skills to help them (Deng & Harris, 2008; Pang & Richey, 2006).

Special Education in the United States

Since 1975, and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L.94-142) the United States has guaranteed a *free* and *appropriate* education for all students with disabilities. Under this act, there are 13 recognized categories of disability, and they are autism, developmental delay, visual impairment, hearing impairment, emotional disturbance, traumatic brain injury, language and speech disorders, deaf-blindness, multiple handicap, physically handicapped, mental retardation, other health impaired and specific learning disability. Of these categories, by far the highest incidence is those with learning disabilities (disabilitycompendium.org, 2011).

The Special Education Process is consistently implemented in American schools. After first trying some strategies of their own, teachers will refer a struggling student's case to the Student Study Team. The Student Study Team is a problem-solving body that exists in all elementary schools in the United States. It is also sometimes referred to as a Child Study Team or Student Success team. It is a multidisciplinary team consisting of a school principal (or other person given the authority by the principal), the referring teacher of the student under concern, the parent of the child, a special education professional, a school psychologist, a nurse, and other personnel if appropriate, such as a bilingual coordinator (if the child is being educated in his second language). The team analyzes samples of the child's class work and brainstorms solutions to help the child. They would not, under best practices, immediately begin testing the child to see if he/she is qualified for special education services. They would try other strategies first. If unsuccessful, the Student Study team will then refer the child for special education testing. If the child ends up qualifying for special education services, an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) is constructed.

The IEP provides the student with all of the support that they might need to be successful academically. These supports include appropriately designed academic and functional goals for the child, placement in their least restrictive environment, and services such as counseling, assistive technology, testing modifications and accommodations, behavior support, transitional services, transportation, and extended school year if necessary.

The student's IEP remains in effect for one year. At least once a year, the IEP is reviewed to determine if changes need to be made to the child's educational program. Parents are given progress reports several times during the school year (at every grading period) detailing how the student is progressing on his or her special education goals. Every three years, the student must be reevaluated to determine if he or she is still eligible for special education services. This involves having the school psychologist and special education professional complete the same testing again.

The special education process for children with learning disabilities, in the United States, can be a cumbersome exercise, with much paperwork to keep in order to stay in compliance with existing laws and regulations. However, it has ensured a consistency across the country with regard to the services provided.

Comparing Special Education in China and the United States

There is a remarkable consistency in how special education is implemented in the United States. This is due to the federal prescriptive law governing special education in the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. Services are quite similar no matter where one attends school, whether that school be urban or rural, largely middle class or largely poor.

China, on the other hand, is a model of *inconsistency* when it comes to special education. Attempts to compare the two systems are very difficult due to the inconsistency of services and the different context in which schools in China are run. There are IEPs in some Chinese schools, and there are disabled students in some regular Chinese schools, but the paper work and identification processes have yet to be standardized, as they are in the USA.

Methods

While the context of special education is quite different in China and the United States, one can compare the support that American and Chinese teachers receive to help deal with struggling students. Thanks to the support of faculty at Hebei Normal University, the author was taken to two Chinese public primary schools in Shijiazhuang City and allowed to visit with faculty at these schools. In order to find out the differences between special education services in China and the United States, a brief survey was administered to teachers at these two Chinese primary schools and three American primary schools. First through fifth grade teachers participated voluntarily, and were asked the following research questions:

1. How many students are in your class?
2. Does an expert come into your class to assist you with struggling students?
3. Do struggling students leave your room for help from an expert in a *special room*?

Research Results

Teachers in the United States had remarkably smaller class sizes than did their counterparts in China, with a mean for United States class sizes being 22.62 as opposed to China's 59.46. See Table 1 for results. While 74.3% of American classrooms surveyed implemented inclusion, none of the Chinese classrooms surveyed did the same. See Table 2 for results. While 89.7% of American classrooms surveyed sent children to pullout rooms for help from an expert, none of the Chinese classrooms surveyed did the same. See Table 3 for results. 100% of the American classrooms surveyed benefited from either or both Inclusion and Pullout Services, but none of the Chinese classrooms surveyed did either. See Table 4 for results.

Table 1. Mean Class Size by Country, Standard Deviation, and Number of Classes

Country	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
United States	22.62	2.65	26
China	59.46	8.42	26

Note. The difference between the two means (22.62 vs. 59.46) was significant, $t(50) = -21.292, p < .001$.

Table 2. Number of Classrooms by Country, Percentage Implementing Inclusion

Country	Number of Classrooms	Percentage Implementing Inclusion
United States	26	74.3%
China	26	0%

Note. The difference between the two percentages (74.3 vs. 0) was significant, $chi-square (1, N=52) = 25.26, p < .001$.

Table 3. Number of Classrooms by Country, Percentage Implementing Pullout

Country	Number of Classrooms	Percentage Implementing Pullout
United States	26	89.7%
China	26	0%

Note. The difference between the two percentages (89.7 vs. 0) was significant, $chi-square (1, N=52) = 41.24, p < .001$.

Table 4. Number of Classrooms by Country, Percentage Implementing Inclusion and/or Pullout

Country	Number of Classrooms	Percentage Implementing Inclusion and/or Pullout
United States	26	100%
China	26	0%

Note. The difference between the two percentages (100 vs. 0) was significant, chi-square (1, N=52) = 52, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The small class sizes depicted in the survey results are typical of elementary classrooms in the United States (OECD, 2009). There are state laws that limit class size, and it is rare for a 1st-5th grade classroom to have as many as 30 in the room. In fact, some states forbid class sizes greater than 20 in grades 1-3. China's class sizes are reflective of their country's huge population and the fact that there is limited diversity in a typical Chinese classroom.

The consistency of services in the United States and the lack of consistency in China demonstrated in this survey is due to several factors. For one, schools in the United States are required to offer a *continuum of placements* which accounts for services being provided both in the general education classroom and in a *special* room. Furthermore, all schools have at least one special education professional and access to a school psychologist, thus ensuring compliance.

Despite the similar appearance of the Chinese *Learning in the Regular Classroom* movement, and the United States' trend toward Inclusion, there are many differences. The United States' policy is based on the philosophy of equality of opportunity and diversity from a liberal political system and a pluralistic culture, whereas China had a long tradition of a hierarchal pyramid of social relationships. Equality and decentralization are not a priority in China. The primary goal of China is to give most children with disabilities the opportunity to go to school (i.e., the right to be educated). The primary goal of Inclusion in the United States is to give children the right to be equally educated. China does not require a free and appropriate education. Children with severe and multiple disabilities and many children with moderate disabilities are still excluded. Most of them do not get the opportunity to go to school at all. China's system is simpler and less systematic. The Individualized Education Program, Least Restrictive Environment, and parental involvement are not strongly emphasized in China (Deng, Poon-McBrayer & Farnsworth, 2001). Furthermore, China emphasizes a remedial model more than an educational needs model, and it stresses identification and compensation for deficits more than identification and development of competence and potential (Deng, Poon-McBrayer & Farnsworth, 2001). Finally, this *Learning in the Regular Classroom* movement does not necessarily reflect allegiance to the concept of inclusion, rather it more accurately reflects a shortage of personnel, limited fiscal resources and facilities, in addition to geographical considerations (Deng & Manset, 2000).

Conclusion

The uniformity of the process by which disabled students are served in the United States helps ensure that all children have access to an appropriate education. The United States can serve as a model for other countries attempting to do the same. China could make some specific changes to their special education process that would be an immediate benefit to their students with disabilities. For one, a continuum of available placements would be more appropriate for a wider range of abilities than just *inclusion* in a general education classroom. Additionally, personnel needs to be allocated to assist general education teachers who have students with disabilities in their highly populated classrooms. Teacher training is also an important issue. More colleges of education in China need to have special educators on their faculties. Not only that, but general education teachers need training in inclusive methods, similar to the training that pre-service teachers in the United States receive. Finally, laws that would reduce the large class sizes in China would provide a relief to teachers of struggling students.

With all of the challenges listed, the future is still brighter for children with exceptional needs in China. Teachers are being trained in more flexible methods, and in addition to the traditional whole-class lecture model of instruction, a model that combines whole-class teaching, tutoring outside of class, and cooperative learning has been widely applied (Deng & Manset, 2000). Additionally, parental advocacy is on the rise in China. In the United States, the advocacy efforts of parents (including litigation) were a main factor in bringing about a system of free and appropriate public education, including education in inclusive settings, for children with disabilities. Today in China, parents are beginning to address the same issues that parents in the United States addressed more than 25 years ago—the right to an education for their children of different abilities (McCabe, 2003). Finally, programs to prepare special education teachers are developing rapidly (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007).

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