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Attitudes of parents of child with special educational needs towards inclusive education: a perspective from Southwest of China¹

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the attitudes of parents of children with special educational needs towards inclusive education in the southwest of China. The questionnaire was designed to obtain the needed data and was distributed to parents of children with special educational needs, who were learning in regular classrooms in 36 public, regular primary schools in the southwest of China. The analysis of the collected data indicated three main characteristics. The majority of parents recognized the advantages of inclusive education and preferred their children to study in regular schools. At the same time there were still 44.8% of parents that recognized the benefits of a special school. Most of the parents had low expectations for their children's development. The study ended with research-based recommendations for future practice.

Key words: Parents of child with special educational needs, attitudes toward education, inclusive education, southwest of China

Postawy rodziców dzieci ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi wobec nauczania integracyjnego w południowo-zachodnich regionach Chin

Streszczenie

Celem tego badania było określenie postaw rodziców dzieci ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi wobec edukacji integracyjnej. Kwestionariusz, zaprojektowany w celu uzyskania niezbędnych danych, został rozesłany do rodziców dzieci ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi, których dzieci uczyły się w 36 regularnych publicznych szkołach podstawowych w Chinach. Analiza zebranych danych wskazuje trzy główne tendencje: większość rodziców uznaje korzyści płynące z edukacji włączającej i woleliby, aby ich dzieci ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi uczyły się w zwykłej szkole; równocześnie 44,8% rodziców dostrzeżało korzyści wynikające z uczęszczania przez ich dzieci do szkoły specjalnej; oczekiwania rodziców odnośnie do rozwoju swoich dzieci były dość niskie. Większość z nich w niewielkim stopniu przewidywała rozwój swoich dzieci. Artykuł kończą, wynikające z przeprowadzonych badań, zalecenia dotyczące praktycznych działań w przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzice dziecka ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi, postawy wobec edukacji, kształcenie integracyjne w Republice Ludowej Chin

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Introduction

China began to initiate inclusive education (IE) nationally under the name of *sui ban jiu du* (Learning in Regular Classroom, LRC) in response to global trends and domestic pragmatic requirements after middle of 1980s (Deng & Zhu, 2007). LRC has become the key form for providing obligatory education to children with special educational needs (SEN) in China. Though Chinese special education has gotten rapid development since the end of 1970s, special educational resources are still limited for children with SEN because of huge population and the people of disabilities are dispersed very broadly. Nowadays, in China, the population exceeds 1.3 billion, and according to the official statistic, there were 82.96 million people with disabilities up to 2006, 6.34% of whole population (Leading Group of the Second China National Sample Survey on Disability & National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2007, May 28). IE has great significance for most of the children with SEN in China. IE has been implemented more than twenty years in China, on the one hand, the amount of children with SEN learning in regular schools increased greatly, on the other hand, the quality of IE is still a problem, even some children with SEN only were 'sitting' alone in the regular classrooms or their names were on the registry but they stayed at home (e.g., Chen, 2003; Meng, Liu & Liu, 2007). The development of Chinese IE is experiencing some difficulties. The economic development of southwest of China is slower than the other areas of China and its IE has some own developmental features and difficulties. For to know more about that, the first thing author want to know is what attitudes the parents of child with SEN have towards IE?

There were different opinions among Chinese researchers as to the attitudes of parents of child with SEN towards IE. In a review of attitudinal researches of Cheng, et al. (2006), it concluded from many successful family education cases for children with SEN that good family education was the basis of those children's successful development. Some Chinese researchers compared the attitudes between parents of child with and without SEN; research result indicated that parents of child with SEN were more positive than general parents on the attitudes towards IE (Niu, Liu & Tian, 2005). The researchers also revealed that parents of child with SEN still had different attitudes towards IE, for example, the parents of child with hearing impairment were more positive than parents of child with intellectual disability (*ibidem*). And they concluded in this research report that parents' attitudes were not influenced by their education degree, occupation and gender.

For to further realize the real current status of the attitudes of parents of child with SEN towards IE, following research questions was the focus of this study:

1. What were the attitudes of parents of child with SEN towards IE in southwestern China?
2. What supports did those parents most need to help their children with SEN learn in regular classrooms better?

Method

Research instrument

After reviewing relevant Western and China's literatures describing stakeholders' (especially teachers', parents' and principals') perceptions of and attitudes towards IE (e.g., Niu, Liu & Tian, 2005), three principal components were designed to explore parents' attitudes towards IE: the advantages of IE, the disadvantages of IE and advantages of special school, and parents' expectation on their children with SEN. According to the research questions of this study, one draft of questionnaire was indentified, carefully worded and formatted in Chinese by author for parents whose children with SEN were learning in regular primary classrooms.

Author invited 6 special education experts and 10 front line practitioners with at least 10 years experiences of implementing IE in regular schools in China to review the draft and give suggestions. Minor changes in the wording and format of items of draft was made following professionals' critical reviews. The final questionnaire was field-tested by using 30 parents whose children with SEN were learning in regular primary schools.

This questionnaire comprises 4 parts. An introductory statement is attached to declare the purpose and significance of this research and assurance of confidentiality in the first part. The second section is open-ended questions to elicit respondents' background information. The third section uses a 5-point Liker scale (strongly disagree, mildly disagree, not sure, mildly agree, strongly agree) format for items assessing respondents' attitudes towards IE. The last section designs one open question to ask for respondents to list three most difficult things that their children with disabilities were facing in her/his inclusive schooling. Totally, there are 22 items.

Sampling

The respondents were parents whose children with SEN were learning in urban and rural primary regular schools in Sichuan Province, which is located in the southwest of China, a population with 83,29 million (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2001). Two sample sites, the Qingyang District and the Xinjin County of Chengdu city were selected for investigation. Primary regular schools that had students with any of the six major disabilities, intellectual disability, hearing or visual disability, autism spectrum disability, cerebral palsy and physical disability in classes had been chosen in the two sample sites from grade 1 to grade 5. As a result, 58 out of 80 returned questionnaires were identified as valid, including 41 urban questionnaires and 17 rural questionnaires.

Table 1 showed demographic information of southwestern Chinese parent² sample. A view of table 1 indicated that the sample had a high percentage of female

² In most cases, the "parents" means parents of children with special educational needs if we do not give special explanation for it.

respondents (65.5%). Majority (74.1%) of parents were 30-39 years old. 65.5% of the total respondents received education under college level. About half (51.7%) of them had never received training or course for children with SEN, only 13.8% of them received periodic training or course. 27.6% of total respondents received less than one month training or course, 5.2% received one month to 6 month training or course, 15.5% received more than 6 months training or course. Majority (75.4%) of respondents had never taken part in any parents associations or kept in touched with them.

Table 1. Demographic information of the parent sample (P.R.C)

Items	Variable	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 58)	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	20	34.5
	Female	38	65.5
Age	30–39 years	43	74.1
	40–49 years	15	25.9
Education background	Basic education	29	50.0
	Secondary education	9	15.5
	College programs	9	15.5
	Bachelor programs	7	12.1
	Master or Ph.D programs	4	6.9
Training types	None	30	51.7
	Nonperiodical	20	34.5
	Periodical	8	13.8
Training time	Within one week	4	6.9
	1 week to 1 month	12	20.7
	1 month to 6 months	3	5.2
	6 months to 1 year	4	6.9
	1 year above	5	8.6
	Missing	30	51.7
Learning grades (child with SEN)	1	8	13.8
	2	5	8.6
	3	14	24.1
	4	3	5.2
	5	22	37.9
	Missing	6	10.3
Membership of association for parents of children with SEN	Yes	14	24.1
	No	44	75.4

Note: IE = Inclusive Education; SEN = Special Educational Needs

Procedures

Firstly, author contacted with related local education departments to make an announcement to all participating schools for cooperation. After that, the author conducted the formal survey in an on the spot way from school to school personally.

Data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows (15.0) for statistical analysis. Analysis of the data was conducted by using descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA.

Results

Results from closed questions of this questionnaire

Table 2 showed strong support (93.1%) by parents was given to agree all children have the right to study in regular school as same as their typical peers, and it seems there were no disputes on this point (SD = 0.608). 65.5% of them agreed there were sufficient resources and professionals to support IE. The majority (72.5%) of the parents agreed their children with SEN could improve academic achievement faster in regular school than in separate and special settings. 81% of them agreed IE was likely to have a positive effective on children's with SEN social and emotional development. 89.6% of them agreed regular education teachers could give appropriate attention and care to their children in regular classes. 89.7% of them agree that IE could facilitate understanding, acceptance and social interaction between children with and without SEN. 88.0% of them agreed IE made typical students to be prone to accept other person's diversities, recognize themselves more easily and be ready to help others. And 87.9% of them preferred their children with SEN to study in regular school. These statistic data indicated majority of respondents agreed IE had positive advantages for their children with SEN.

Table 2. The advantages of inclusive education

Items	Sd	Md	Ns	Ma	Sa	M/SD
Children with SEN have the right to study in regular school as same as their typical peers.	0	0	6.9%	51.7%	41.4%	4.34/0.608
There are sufficient resources and professionals to support IE in regular schools.	0	8.6%	25.9%	43.1%	22.4%	3.79/0.894
Academic achievement of children with SEN can be promoted faster in regular classroom than in special class or special school.	0	8.6%	19.0%	46.6%	25.9%	3.89/0.892
IE is likely to have a positive effect on the social and emotional development of students with SEN.	0	5.2%	13.8%	56.9%	24.1%	4.00/0.772
Children with SEN can get regular education teachers' appropriate attentions and cares in regular class.	1.7%	1.7%	8.6%	60.3%	29.3%	4.17/0.653
IE can facilitate understanding, acceptance and social interaction between children with and without SEN.	0	1.7%	6.9%	62.1%	27.6%	4.12/0.751
IE makes typical students be prone to accept other person's diversities, recognize themselves more easily and be ready to help others.		3.4%	8.6%	62.1%	25.9%	4.10/0.693
As parents, I prefer my child to study at regular school.		5.2%	6.9%	53.4%	34.5%	4.17/0.775

Note: Sd = Strong disagree, Md = Mildly disagree, Ns = Not sure, Ma = Mildly agree, Sa = Strong agree; Weights of "1", "2", "3", "4", "5" are correspondent to the categories "strong disagree", "mildly disagree", "not sure", "mildly agree" and "strong agree"; IE = Inclusive Education, SEN = Special Educational Needs

Meanwhile, Table 3 showed about half (44.8%) of respondents reported children with SEN could get more effective and systematic resources in special

and separate settings, mean score ($M = 3.02$) and standard deviation ($SD = 1.207$) of this item showed responses had been centered on “not sure” and it seemed to be controversial. There were 31% of respondents agreed children with SEN were easily discriminated and isolated by their typical peers in regular classrooms. About half (48.3%) agreed children with SEN lacked enterprise and sense of achievement comparing with their typical peers.

Table 3. The disadvantages of inclusive education and advantages of special school

Items	Sd	Md	Ns	Ma	Sa	M/SD
Children with SEN are easily discriminated and isolated by their typical peers in regular classroom.	5.2%	41.4%	22.4%	29.3%	1.7%	3.19/0.981
Children with SEN can get more effective and systematic resources in special, separate settings.	12.1%	29.3%	13.8%	37.9%	6.9%	3.02/1.207
The impairments of children with SEN affect their interaction with common children.	1.7%	34.5%	8.6%	50.0%	5.2%	2.78/1.044
Children with SEN lack enterprise and sense of achievement comparing with their typical peers.	3.4%	32.8%	15.5%	41.4%	6.9%	2.84/1.073

Note: Sd = Strong disagree, Md = Mildly disagree, Ns = Not sure, Ma = Mildly agree, Sa = Strong agree; adverse weights of “5”, “4”, “3”, “2”, “1” are correspondent to the categories “strong disagree”, “mildly disagree”, “not sure”, “mildly agree” and “strong agree” to all the items in Table 4; IE = Inclusive Education, SEN = Special Educational Needs

At the same time, 53.5% of respondents showed low expectation on their children’s development in the future and it seemed to be controversial on this point ($SD=1.24$) in Table 4.

Table 4. The expectation of parents on their child with SEN

Items	Sd	Md	Ns	Ma	Sa	M/SD
For children with SEN we only expect that they will be more self-sufficing in the future, we can not expect they will do well as same as their typical peers.	6.9%	32.8%	6.9%	39.7%	13.8%	2.79/1.239

Note: Sd = Strong disagree, Md = Mildly disagree, Ns = Not sure, Ma = Mildly agree, Sa = Strong agree; adverse weights of “5”, “4”, “3”, “2”, “1” are correspondent to the categories “strong disagree”, “mildly disagree”, “not sure”, “mildly agree” and “strong agree” to the item in Table 3; SEN = Special Educational Needs

As a whole, average mean of whole attitude was 3.63 with a relative lower standard deviation of 0.473, indicating all responses of this section had been centered on “mildly agree” at a large extent, that’s to say, it seemed that respondents had relative positive attitudes towards IE.

In addition, by utilizing one-way ANOVA in terms of respondents' attitudes towards IE as whole, parents with different gender, age, training types and time did not demonstrate significant differences. There was significant difference between parents with different education background, $F(4,53) = 3.466, p < 0.05$. Also, there was no significant difference between parents who had taken part in some organization for parents of children with SEN and parents who had never taken part in it.

Result from open question of this questionnaire

At the last part of questionnaire for parents, one open question was designed to ask respondents to write down three current difficulties their exceptional children were facing during learning in regular classrooms. About half of total respondents wrote down their opinions. On the whole, all difficulties were outlined as following:

"Our children need more supports from their regular education teachers."

Lots of parents reported they hoped regular education teachers could have more time, patience and kindness to take good care of their children and help their children solve learning difficulties. Part of parents hoped teachers working in regular class could encourage their exceptional children more and enhance their children's confidence to study in regular class via trying to find out and confirm these children's strong points and potential talents. Some of them reported regular teachers had not enough knowledge and skills of special education to educate their children.

"Regular schools lack necessary specialists and additional services for our children."

Some parents hoped regular schools could arrange teacher assistant or some special education teachers to tutor their children's study in class or after class. Several parents reported there were no special education teachers to cultivate exceptional children's appropriate habits of learning, behavioral and social interaction and they hoped regular schools could provide some compensation and rehabilitation training for their exceptional children, such as speech therapy. Few parents hoped regular schools could arrange some professional psychologists to provide psychological tutoring and cultivate exceptional children's fair psyches living in actual society. Few parents reported regular schools should provide necessary services for their children.

"The atmosphere of regular class, regular school and whole society should be further improved."

Some parents hoped their children could get more support, consideration and help from their typical classmates. Some parents hoped typical students could more understand and embrace their children's problematic behaviors and did not laugh at them. And few parents hoped to get more parents' of typical students support, such as more actively encouraged their typical children to communicate and play with their exceptional classmates. Few parents hoped leaders of regular schools

could attach more importance to IE and made school atmosphere more friendly, acceptable, and warm for their children. And some parents hoped regular school could offer more platforms or opportunities for exceptional children to show their strengths and various talents. Few parents reported IE needed more attention and understanding of general public.

“We need training about how to parenting exceptional children and we need opportunities to communicate parenting experiences with other parents of children with SEN and learn from each other.”

Some parents “said”, “we need training to learn how to parenting our exceptional children as same as teachers”. Some parents also expressed strong desires to have opportunities to communicate and learn from each other with other parents who had similar situation as them.

“Government should support IE more.”

In short, parents expressed these desires: central and local government should provide more financial support to family of children with SEN to reduce the heavy financial burdens of parents; government should establish more cogent policies to protect their children’s right to go to regular schools, to provide necessary and specific material and human resources to safeguard the implement of IE in prior; government should strength publicity and education to cultivate good society atmosphere to accept persons with disabilities better and better.

Summary of results

Through overall review of parents’ attitudes towards inclusive education, three main characteristics appear: majority of them recognized the advantages of inclusive education and preferred their child with SEN to study in regular school; at the same time, through statistic indicated parents’ attitudes towards special school was neutral, but there were still 44.8% of them agreed the benefits of special school; and most of them had low expectation on their children’s development.

Discussion

The findings from questionnaire mentioned above showed respondents were not consistent with themselves. But these contradictions rightly reflected some characteristics of Chinese IE.

Why those parents of child with SEN did have complicated attitudes towards IE? Firstly, the author guesses majority of them lacked clear perceptions about IE because most of them had not opportunities to receive courses about special education; secondly, most of the time, learning in regular class was the only alternative to their children though regular schools had not sufficient resources to support these exceptional children, they had to accept it; thirdly, some parents thought it was a kind of stigma for their exceptional children to go to special school

but there were better support resources and qualified special education teachers in special schools; fourthly, though China had carried out some policies to protect the educational rights in different education levels and promote social welfare and occupational placement for people with disabilities, it was still more difficult for children with SEN to get access to higher education in the context of exam-orientation education system and get appropriate work in such competitive society after receiving compulsory education.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, because adverse social atmosphere and traditional notions for people with disabilities, lacking effective and systematic support system for IE and for family of child with SEN, the attitudes of southwestern Chinese parents of child with SEN towards IE was still contradictive. To improve this status quo, following aspects may be considered:

Government should further intensify and fostering positive social attitudes towards persons with disabilities via all kinds of approaches;

Central and local government must accelerate the pace of legislation for special education, especially to establish the specific law of special education to mandate clear and flexible government financial support, systematic professional training and support to IE and families of child with SEN;

Domestic or abroad professionals or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could promote the establishment of all kinds of associations or clubs for and provide more training opportunities to parents of child with SEN.

Limitation of this research

Our Chinese questionnaire sample was limited to parents of child with SEN in 36 regular primary schools in Chengdu city of Sichuan Province in southwestern China. It is unknown whether the characteristics of respondents from these regions might be shared by samples from other Chinese regions.

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