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EDC 237: Comparative Education

6 May 2015

Special Education Reform in China and the United States

As part of ongoing global and national discourse, many modern societies grapple with the issue of including and accommodating students with disabilities in their education systems. Educational reforms aimed at addressing this issue in different countries are thus often shaped by unique historical and cultural forces and reflected in actual practice. Since the 1970s, special education reform in China has focused on universalization of special education while reform in the United States has focused on increasing quality of special education In China, legislation geared towards increasing access to special education since the *Open Door Policy* has resulted in the Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) movement alongside a “cascade” schooling system. In the United States, legislative emphasis on quality of special education since the *Civil Rights Movement* has led to streamlined efforts to develop and enhance the inclusive education model. LRC was based on the West’s inclusive education model, but largely retains characteristics unique to China’s sociohistorical background. It is a much more pragmatic and less comprehensive model than inclusive education. Consequently, this has resulted in lower quality of education for special needs students in China.

Education did not become a national venture until the 1950s when Mao Zedong founded the People’s Republic of China. Prior then, special education had been limited to those with hearing and visual impairments, and they were provided by the 42 private special education schools that existed in China then (as cited in Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). During the period that Mao was in power, the need to cultivate workers with a consciousness for socialist ideals led to more special schools being established in order to provide special needs students with an education and prepare them for national labor. Special needs students were granted an equal status in society, but such status was for practical purposes only; promoting loyalty to the Communist party and collectivism rather than placing value on the notions of human rights and individualism determined the role and status that special needs students had in Chinese society (Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007). In addition, special education schools remained exclusive to those with hearing and visual impairments, and those with other forms of disability such as mental retardation, learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, multiple disabilities, etc. were excluded from formal education entirely (Deng, Poon-Mcbrayer, & Farnswo, 2001).

Beginning in the 1980s when Deng Xiaoping came into power, China began to develop a modern education system. The Open Door Policy established by Deng Xiaoping reopened Chinese trade to the United States and bolstered the Chinese economy. This economic growth meant that there would be more resources to allocate to schools. Central structural reform and decentralization provided schools with more autonomy to implement compulsory education (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). In addition to economic growth, the onset of globalization brought an influx of Western culture into China. Western models of inclusive education and the notion that all students should receive an education regardless of having a disability prompted education reform aimed at increasing access to schooling for special needs students (Deng et al., 2001).

In 1986, the Chinese government passed the Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China. The law mandated 9 years of compulsory schooling for all children and required schools (general or special schools) to accept children with special needs. “Special needs” students are defined by the Chinese government as having either a visual, hearing, intellectual, physical, psychiatric and/or multiple impairments (“Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China,” 1999). Compared to the United States, China does not recognize other forms of disabilities such as autism or other severe cognitive impairments. This is because severe cognitive impairments are often misdiagnosed as intellectual disabilities due to general lack of knowledge about disabilities in China (Huang & Wheeler, 2007). Moreover, China is an agricultural-based society, so a significant part of the population lives in rural China where learning to read and write is not necessary for manual labor. As a result, many children with disabilities who live in these rural areas where unfavorable economic conditions exist often go undiagnosed because they do not attend school ((Worrell & Taber, 2009).

Since the 1986 Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China, several other pieces of legislation have followed. Some of these reforms include the *1985* *Regulation on Admission and Graduation of Juveniles with Disabilities in Higher Education*, the *1988* *5-Year Project for Disabled Persons*, the *1990 Law on the Protection of the Disabled Persons*, the *1995 Education Law of the People’s Republic of China*, and the *1996 Five-Year Work Program for Implementing Compulsory Education for Children with Disabilities*. The general trend is that most of these reforms serve to reinforce the idea of increasing access to education for special needs students by emphasizing on increasing enrollment rates, building more schools (particularly in rural areas), and removing barriers to higher education for special needs students. For example, the *1996 Five-Year Work Program for Implementing Compulsory Education for Children with Disabilities* stipulated that counties with a population of at least 30,000 should establish special schools and towns were to provide special classes alongside LRC programs (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012).

The LRC model has been an essential component of the Chinese government’s efforts to increase access to special education. In the 1988 National Conference on Special Education, the State Education Commission said that there would be a shift from solely relying on special schools for providing special education to developing more LRC programs in regular schools (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001). Government advocacy supporting the LRC model has been rearticulated in the 1988 and 1996 5-Year Work Programs. The general principle behind the LRC model is that it seeks to teach students with disabilities within general education classrooms. Those eligible for LRC programs include students with hearing impairments, visual impairments, and mental retardation, while those with cognitive moderate to severe cognitive disabilities or multiple disabilities are excluded from receiving LRC services (Deng et al., 2001). In China, the LRC model has been developing alongside the cascade system, which provides a “cascade of special education” services, extending from the least restrictive environments (general classrooms) to the most restrictive environments (e.g. segregated special schools) (Deno, 1970). All classified students with disabilities receive some sort of education in varying degrees (LER/MER) based on individual circumstances. The goal is to gradually transition students from the MER to the LER (Deno, 1970).

The LRC movement has significantly increased enrollment rates of special needs students. The Ministry of Education of the P.R.C states that about 65% of students with disabilities are now being educated in general education settings. Those with learning disabilities constituted a greater proportion of that percentage (2011). Despite this achievement, the quality of special education from LRC is lacking, and there have been many problems with effectively implementing LRC. Problems with implementing LRC include large classroom sizes, lack of personnel (e.g. teacher assistants, paraprofessionals) and material resources (e.g. modified textbooks), inadequate teacher training, professional development programs that lack special education content, and the absence of an appropriate evaluation system for special needs students. As a result, some special needs students have been observed “drifting in regular classrooms” – sitting alone, isolated, or staying at home (Deng et al., 2001).

The absence of quality special education observed in LRC models is a reflection of the 1986 Compulsory Law of Education and subsequent legislation focused on increasing access to education in China. LRC was not originally adopted with the intention of providing all special needs students with an appropriate, or “quality,” education but rather to address a large portion of the special needs population that had been previously excluded from formal education and to give them the opportunity to receive an education. The LRC model was thus designed to be pragmatic and simplistic, with a greater emphasis on producing quantifiable results such as enrollment ratios and number of special schools. The current LRC model is also an accurate representation of “the fact that China, as a [still] developing nation with rapid but unbalanced economic development, lacks resources to focus on the quality of education” (as cited in Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). Furthermore, it is important to consider that the LRC model was adopted not long after the 1986 Compulsory Education Law, when China was still recovering from the political and social turbulence of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s and just only beginning to develop a modern education system. Therefore, some consideration must be put into the timing of and the length of time since legislation has been put into effect. Unlike the United States, China has only modernized within the last half-century, and as a result sufficient time must be given to allow these reforms to take root and mature.

Using Thomas’s framework to (Kubow et. al, 2007) look at how sociopolitical factors affect special education, the quality of LRC special education can also be influenced by how much support (e.g. funding) is actually guaranteed to implement legislation as well as the latitude of sociopolitical action that major stakeholders have in the special education process. For example, analyzing the 1986 Compulsory Education Law reveals that there does not seem to be a procedure for distributing federal funds to local governments, only that “the state shall provide subsidies toward the funds for implementing compulsory education in regions that have economic difficulties” (“Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China,” 1999). Such ambiguities in legislation can often result in authorities at both state and local level finding excuses to avoid carrying out policy (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). Without a detailed strategy for getting funds into schools, schools are not able to provide the resources or instructional training necessary for quality education. Another barrier to quality education is that the 1986 Compulsory Education Law does not provide parents of special education students or professionals (e.g. paraprofessionals) with a legal mechanism for becoming involved in special needs students’ educational development. In China, the responsibility of drafting, interpreting, and implementing special education programs have always fallen in the hands of various central authorities. Deng & Poon McBrayer suggest that this is because traditional Confucian values such as respect for hierarchical relationships and harmony have influenced the Chinese to “respect authority, obey rules, and accept their status within society” (2012). Historically, people with disabilities in China have occupied the lowest social class, and education was catered exclusively towards those serving in the elite bureaucracy (Deng et al., 2001). This may explain why parents, professionals, and other personnel have rarely formed advocacy groups for special education. As a result, China’s special education system has been unable to benefit from the feedback and opinions of other stakeholders. Wide acceptance of students with disabilities in Chinese culture remains a work in progress (Deng & Poon McBrayer, 2012).

The United States also underwent significant special education reform beginning in the 1970s. According to the Office of Special Education Programs, only 20% of children with special disabilities were being educated in the United States in the early 1970s (2000). State compulsory educations laws varied, with some providing the outright exclusion of students with disabilities if they did not meet strict state requirements; many students with disabilities had to be considered “educable” rather than “trainable” in order to be admitted into public schools (Zettel & Ballard, 1979). Sparked by the Civil Rights Movement and its message of advancing human rights, personal freedom, and social equality, parents and advocacy groups began filing a series of lawsuits against states. These plaintiffs claimed that by excluding special needs’ students from public schooling, they were violating students’ constitutional right to equal educational opportunity (as cited in Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001). The result of these successful lawsuits was that by 1972, almost 70% of states had revised their compulsory education policies to include special needs students (Zettel & Ballard, 1979). Still, many parents, advocates of special education, and legislators worried that there was too much variation in quality of special education across state borders and that a federal equivalent to the state laws was necessary to establish a national standard (Katsiyannis et al., 2001).

In 1975, the federal government passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). By far one of the most important pieces of special education legislation, this law guarantees students with disabilities a “free and appropriate education” (Public Law 94-142). 13 classifications of special needs students are covered by this law: autism, developmental delay, visual impairment, hearing impairment, emotional disturbance, traumatic brain injury, language and speech disorders, deaf blindness, multiple handicap, physically handicapped, mental retardation, and other health impaired and specific learning disability. Since then, EAHCA has amended its title to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Key features of IDEA include (a) guaranteeing all special needs students with a free and appropriate public education by (b) including special needs students in the least restrictive environments (c) developing an individualized education plan (IEP) and assuring teachers’ and parents’ rights to be involved in the IEP process (d) developing non-discriminatory testing and evaluation for special needs students (e) assisting states in the funding of special education and (f) providing early child identification services.

The idea that all special needs students deserve a “free and appropriate education” has been central to special education reforms since the 1970s. The word “appropriate” suggests that each student is entitled to a quality education that is unique and specific to their needs and reflects the Western belief that individual learners come in different sizes, shapes, and abilities. In addition, IDEA supports an inclusive education model in which special needs students are encouraged to learn in the least restrictive environment. It is not the same as the LRC model (although they have similar roots) because the purpose of an inclusive education is not to increase access to education for special needs students but to “support, and [offer] services in high-quality, age-appropriate general education classrooms…with a nurturing culture of acceptance, belonging, and community based on the goal of meeting the diverse needs of all learners” (as cited in Deng Meng & Zhu Zhiyong, 2007). The inclusive education model drew from the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement, when values such as individualism, personal freedom, diversity, and social equality formed the basis of the movement. In socialist China, however, values such as diversity and individualism are suppressed in favor of collectivism and maintaining social order. Because of this, special education reforms since the 1970s in the United States have captured the spirit of these Western ideals and focused on increasing quality of special education rather than on mass access to education.

Using Thomas’s framework to (Kubow et. al, 2007) look at how sociopolitical factors affect special education in the United States, the quality of special education is significantly influenced by how much support (e.g. funding) the government gives in implementing legislation as well as the latitude of sociopolitical action that parents and teachers have in the special education process. Compared to the 1986 Compulsory of Education in China, IDEA is a much more comprehensive and dynamic law. Not only does it guarantee special needs students the right to an education, but it also supports implementation by detailing specific guidelines for providing and allocating funds to special needs programs and services. Part B of IDEA establishes a funding mechanism for distributing money from the national level to the state and local level. In order for states to qualify for federal funding, they must submit comprehensive annual plans detailing (a) the system of diagnosis and evaluation of special needs students (b) programs and services that will used to provide an appropriate education and (c) procedural safeguards (e.g. parent involvement and IEP) for ensuring that special education services are running smoothly. Once the plans have been accepted for federal funding, states receive financial assistance from the federal government in the form of supplementary funding. Federal funds are not supposed to replace state expenditures on special education; rather they are meant to increase state expenditure on special education. States, according to the Constitution, are responsible for funding most the cost of special education. IDEA stipulates that 40% of a state’s cost in spending on special education will be provided by the federal government; however, in practice, only 8% or 10% of such state expenditures are provided by the federal government (Katsiyannis et al., 2001). Furthermore, Congress must reauthorize IDEA every four years; this ensures that the law does not remain static and changes in the system may be accommodated for.

Part B of IDEA also mandates that each special needs student requires an individualized education program. The IEP is central to constructing an “appropriate education” for each special needs student. An IEP is a statement written by a group of people composed of the parent of the special needs student, school principal, teachers, paraprofessional, and whenever appropriate, the special needs student, school psychologist, and/or nurse. The IEP contains (a) the students current performance level (b) a statement of annual goals and objectives (c) a statement describing what kind and how special education services will be tailored to fit the needs of the student (e.g. transportation, textbook, instruction) and (d) an assessment/evaluation system to monitor student progress. An IEP is reviewed every year to accommodate for any changes the student requires (Kritzer, 2012).

Unlike the United States, special education reforms since the 1970s in China do not have an IEP equivalent. There is neither a mechanism for parent involvement or an assessment system in China. One of the most important features of the IEP is that it gives a variety of stakeholders the autonomy and flexibility to contribute to the special education process. The belief is that parents and professionals are essential and valuable stakeholders in shaping the course of education. Such belief draws from the great value that is placed on the democratic process in the United States.

Since the 1970s, special education reforms in China and the United have made great strides. In China, reforms and practices aimed at increasing access to education for special needs students have increased enrollment rates in the past three decades. However, a tremendous focus on access to special education has resulted in the overlooking of quality education. Factors such as the absence of a funding mechanism, lack of parent involvement, and cultural stigma towards special needs students have all contributed to the low quality of special education. In the United States, however, an emphasis on producing quality special education since the 1970s has “led to better access to public education for students with disabilities, an established infrastructure for educating children with disabilities…and greater inclusion of these children in classrooms with their nondisabled peers” (Aron & Loprest, 2012). Key features of these reforms include the development of an IEP, detailed provisions for funding, and the inclusive education model. Despite the successes of these reforms, it is important to note that the quality of special education in the United States is still a work in progress and requires further research: many special needs students still lag behind their nondisabled peers in terms of educational performance and students with disabilities are more likely to drop out of school (Aron & Loprest, 2012). So, while reforms in the United States continue to work towards improving quality of special education, special education in China today resembles what special education looked like in the United States before the 1970s. China must first continue to progress towards ensuring universal access for special needs students before it can focus on quality education.

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