

Chapter 10

Early Childhood Special Education in China

Advocacy and Practice

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Introduction

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) programs hold a prominent place in China's goals for economic and educational success. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines ECCE as a holistic approach that "supports children's survival, growth, development and learning—including health, nutrition and hygiene, and cognitive, social, physical and emotional development—from birth to entry into primary school in formal, informal and non-formal settings" (UNESCO 2006, p. 17). ECCE programs include children from birth to entry into primary school, usually by age six in China.

Approximately one third of China's young children participate in ECCE programs in nursery (birth to age three), kindergarten (aged three to six), or preprimary (aged five to six) classes, as well as in other avenues of child and parent education programs. These opportunities typically are more available in urban areas than in rural China. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes ECCE as a right for all children, assuring the well being of young children during a time of critical importance in their development. Further, many advocates for ECCE and early intervention promote the finding that services for children with disabilities and developmental delays can compensate for childhood disadvantages, especially offsetting inequities for poor

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children. China's Education Ministry, the All-China Women's Federation, and the Public Health Ministry strongly support policies that promote ECCE for each child.

To identify current perspectives on special education progress and challenges, Chinese university professors conducted a series of interviews with educators, special education researchers, and government leaders in 2009 and 2010. This chapter includes pertinent statements from these interviews that convey the context and evolution of special education in modern China.

Historical Context of Special Education in China

The Confucian theory that places education in high esteem has greatly influenced educational policies and practices in China. Although China has a distinguished tradition of valuing education, the practice of providing special education services in schools did not exist until more recent years (Pang and Richey 2006).

Government-sponsored schools for children with hearing and visual impairments began with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 (Worrell and Taber 2009). Due to political instability in Mainland China, however, educational progress was seriously hampered from the 1950s to 1970 (Lau and Yuen 2010).

As China's doors were opened to Western countries during the social and economic reforms of the late 1970s and 1980s, systematic services for students with disabilities came into being (Chen 1996). Special schools for children with a variety of exceptionalities were expanded in some urban areas in the 1970s and 1980s with a focus on care and rehabilitation (Forlin and Lian 2008). In 1986, the Compulsory Education Law established guidelines that supported all students. Specifically, the legislation required special schools for young children who were deaf, blind, or mentally retarded (Deng et al. 2001).

Another breakthrough occurred in 1988, when special education was moved under the Ministry of Education, which assumed responsibility for 50 % of the funding. In 1990, the Law on the Protection of Disabled Persons emphasized shared responsibility for the care of disabled persons among families, work units, and community organizations; it also underscored the importance of developing early intervention programs. The report *Some Opinions on the Development of Special Education* established basic special education guidelines, including a pre-school component (Chen 1996). At the same time, the State Council General began including special education in regular schools. In 1994, new regulations promoted compulsory education for all children with disabilities (Chen 1996). Prior to this important initiative, 80 % of children with special learning needs reportedly lived in rural areas, whereas most special education centers for young children were in cities.

Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, China has continued to make progress in special education. Worrell and Taber (2009) suggest that "in spite of eligibility and placement issues, and a tremendous population of school aged children, the Chinese have made inroads in terms of including students with disabilities in regular classrooms" (p. 132).

The History of ECCE Programs for Children in China

The first public kindergartens in China date to 1903, when American missionaries brought teachers from Japan (Spodek 1988). In the 1920s, programs for the young children of farmers and factory workers were founded in Nanjing and Shanghai. Based on John Dewey's philosophies, these early childhood centers encouraged children to "employ both hands and minds; to learn by doing" (Zhou 2007, p. 972). The first experimental child education center and teacher training school for early childhood education were established in the 1940s with standards that emphasized good Chinese citizenship, the use of nature and social life, and the principle of learning by doing (Gargiulo and Piao 1995; New and Corcoran 2007; Zhou 2007).

Following World War II, Chinese educators were influential in promoting kindergarten as the basis for country building by instilling good habits and attitudes in young children. In 1952, the Ministry of Education specified that early childhood programs must "ensure that children have a healthy physical and mental development upon entering the elementary school . . . [and] relieve the burden of child care from mothers, so mothers are able to have the time to participate in political, productive and educational activities" (Zhou 2007, p. 971). The National Conference on Education encouraged organizations, businesses, and industries to sponsor their own kindergarten programs for young children. Education and services for very young children became part of the services of government organizations, institutes, and provincial government. In 1989, China developed a policy to build the public and political profile of ECCE and boost levels of children participation in kindergartens. It promoted child development, active learning, attention to individual differences and group functioning, respectful relationships between staff and children, and holistic evaluation of children.

Traditional ECCE teaching practices made the guidelines difficult to implement. Further, in 1996, the Chinese Ministry of Education required more stringent qualifications for early childhood teachers, principals, and other staff working in kindergartens. In 2001, the government issued guidelines for gradually putting progressive ideas into practice while emphasizing the holistic evaluation of children through authentic assessment methods (Deng et al. 2001). For the first time, the new reform proposals embraced the notion that "early childhood education is the foundation of lifelong learning . . . to help children cultivate a positive attitude towards learning and good living habits in an inspiring and enjoyable environment" (Education Commission 2000, p. 30).

Since the mid-1990s, young children with disabilities have been included in China's "education for all" goals. The severity of disability as well as the school's ability to accommodate the student with a disability determines children's placement in a regular education classroom, a special education classroom within a regular school, or a special institution. According to the Ministry of Education, by 2000, only 4.5 % of disabled children were receiving specially designed education services. China is slowly implementing its ambitious goal of extending special education to

Fig. 10.1 Guangzhou Children's Welfare House, Guangzhou, PRC. (Photo courtesy of Wenge Li)



95 % of children with disabilities who reside in cities and 85 % who reside in rural areas that have compulsory school programs, as well 60 % of schools in impoverished areas (Law 2002). Depending on the sponsorship (public enterprises, municipal authorities, local groups, or families) of kindergartens, both the quality of programs and the fees for children vary; however, many of these programs are available for all children, including those with special learning needs whose parents have chosen to enroll them (July 2009) (Fig. 10.1).

Today, the Chinese generally believe that children have a right to special care and protection. The State Council's National Program of Action for Child Development (2001–2010) and the provinces', municipalities', and autonomous regions' programs established 18 basic development goals, 55 supportive targets, and 66 strategic targets for children's "health, education, legal protection, and environmental consciousness" (www.chinatoday.com/cn).

Chinese Children Development Guidelines for 2001–2010 made children's health, education, legal protection, and the environment national priorities. National policies supported by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the National Women's Federation serve the following purposes:

1. Protect young children and mothers by improving their living conditions and the quality of service;
2. Set up the national program and curriculum standards to improve the quality of early childhood education;
3. Coordinate the administration and management for early childhood education programs between different social sectors at the national, provincial, and local government levels;
4. Improve teacher training and professional development;
5. Provide better support and child care service to families and parents; and
6. Provide support for the development of the early childhood education program in underdeveloped areas (New and Corcoran 2007, p. 974).

Results of Surveys with Teachers

In 2005, 24 teachers from 8 English immersion kindergartens were introduced to the Association of Childhood Education International's (ACEI) *Global Guidelines Assessment* (GGA) during a breakout session at the First Annual Symposium of English Immersion Program on Teaching and Research at Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an. They received handouts and information for conducting self-studies in their kindergartens. From December 2005 through February 2006, 11 teachers from 4 kindergartens in Xi'an and 1 from a kindergarten in Beijing responded to the Mandarin version of the GGA. Data reveal the following information related to Area 5: Young Children with Special Needs.

Under Access and Equity of Services, 100 % of the participating teachers rated their kindergartens as "excellent" in four of five indicators. They reported that children of both genders and from all income groups, family backgrounds, and ethnic groups have equal access and opportunities in types and levels of support and services. Two teachers who work in a factory-supported Montessori kindergarten said that children with mothers and fathers who work all types of jobs—from management to factory work—receive the same care and education. Four teachers commented that communication is the job of school administrators.

Under Common Philosophy and Common Aims, 25 % of the participating teachers rated their kindergartens as "good" in working with a team (parents, program staff, other specialists) to meet children's needs. Four teachers from the same kindergarten commented that a parent and the principal provide an aide for a child with autism—a common practice when parents who are part of the kindergarten want their child enrolled. 75 % of teachers at three kindergartens rated their schools as "inadequate" with regard to identifying a person in charge of planning, coordinating, and monitoring services; 25 % of teachers at one kindergarten rated the same criteria as "not available." In terms of reporting plans for children with special needs to government agencies, 100 % of teachers responded "not available."

Under Staff and Service Providers and Service Delivery, 100 % of the participating teachers responded "not available" when asked to rate their fellow staff members and/or specialists and their roles with families and officials in policy-making positions about child care/education services. Responses indicated that every kindergarten has a nurse on staff to give all children regular checkups. Further, teachers noted that working with parents, specialists, and government officials is the responsibility of administrators. Additionally, some teachers indicated that special schools in Xi'an assist children with deafness, blindness, and cognitive delays. One-third of the participating teachers at one kindergarten indicated that children with physical disabilities have opportunities to learn with their classmates and are encouraged to participate as much as they possibly can.

Fig. 10.2 Guangzhou Children's Palace, Guangzhou, PRC. (Photo courtesy of Wenge Li)



Challenges with Special Education in China

University faculty and deans shared the following information about early childhood special education in interviews conducted in Xi'an and Guangzhou in July 2010. In accordance with the current international definition of special education for young children, the phrase “special needs children” is used frequently. Broadly stated, the UNESCO definition of “special learning needs” includes the education of young children who have been identified as having barriers to their abilities to access information and obstacles to learning such as learning disabilities, emotional affective disorder, speech disorders, behavioral problems, conduct problems, communication disorders, dyslexia, mental health problems, and poor physical health. In China, special education generally refers more narrowly to physical and mental disabilities and delays related to child development. Implementation of education for children with disabilities includes the following classifications: deaf, blind, and mentally retarded. An estimated two-million school-age children in China have special education needs. According to 2007 statistics, China had 82.96 million people with disabilities, accounting for 6.34 % of the total population. Among children from birth to five years of age, 1.41 million pre-school children had disabilities. The school-age population of young children with disabilities who receive special education services was 4.53 % (Fig. 10.2).

Pang and Richey (2006) argue that several challenges face the development of special education in China: (1) the lack of effective identification and diagnostic procedures, (2) the lack of an appropriate vocational education system, (3) the scarcity of educational opportunities, and (4) the difficulty in establishing family and professional collaboration. A university professor in Guangzhou reports, “A school for

children with disabilities is needed to solve the problems by varying physical and mental characteristics and needs for their education. The current field of special education in China is not only concerned about the quality of teaching special education and regular classrooms. There are more problems related to the quality of special education schools; ... [both] content and teaching methods need to improve.” (October, 2010)

In discussing why special education for very young children is needed, the professor shared her view that educators need more knowledge of ECCE theories, “Children’s development from zero to six involves the structure of the nervous system. This time period is the important period of development in cognitive, physical, and perceptual development. This time period is important in the development of action; during this period, the plasticity of the nervous system has an impact on the individual’s ability to adapt to the external environment.” She continued, “Within this period of a child’s life, it is often possible to facilitate the realignment of the individual physiological and physical functions. The child’s physical functions can often be corrected and rehabilitated. Early education for children with disabilities and defects is beneficial in order to maximize children’s potential, providing the maximum benefit to their physical and mental development” (July, 2009).

Dr. Zhou Jing, an early childhood professor at East China Normal University, Shanghai, reports, “Currently, ECCE for all children has a prominent place in advocacy groups throughout Chinese society” (October, 2009). Dr. Jing comments on the critical role of university faculty and early childhood teachers in advocating for education and services for all children. The number of special education schools appears to be too small to meet the current needs, especially in rural areas. Dr. Zhou Wei of Shanxi Normal University, Xi’an, reports that while special education schools are concentrated in cities, more are needed (July, 2009).

Few normal schools and teacher training colleges prepare educators for special education. The major source of special education teachers includes graduates of secondary special education, general secondary school or two-year college programs, and a few four-year colleges. Currently, only six Mainland China normal universities offer undergraduate degrees in special education. Fewer than 50 individuals graduated per institution in 2010. There are two college-level special education programs (annually training about 30 people) and 34 secondary special education teacher-training institutions (producing fewer than 400 graduates per year). Due to the employment system in China, many teachers do not stay in the profession. To accommodate the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools, state laws explicitly require courses in special education in teacher preparation programs. Throughout China, there are only a handful of special education professors. Compared with less-developed regions, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other cities have relatively abundant resources and large numbers of special education teachers. In the central region and some small cities, however, there is a serious lack of teachers for children with disabilities.

In general, throughout China, university professors report that conditions in special education schools, when compared with ordinary schools, are challenging due to

higher labor intensity and lower wages. These factors may reduce the number of university/college students who want to teach young children who are deaf, blind, and mentally retarded. One professor of special education says, “China’s biggest problem facing special education is the lack of high-level educators. The problem has seriously hindered the development of special education in China” (July, 2010). University professors, many of whom advocate for special education for young children, call for improvements in the processes for identifying and diagnosing children’s special needs; increased support for mainstreamed/included children with severe and/or multiple disabilities; improvements in education for parents of children with special needs; increased cooperation between schools and families; and teacher training to stop “class float” from occurring.

Normal school faculties suggest that in the recruitment of special education teachers, job training is essential. Further, because on-the-job training can promote exchanges between the special and the regular education teachers, it can enhance their knowledge and help them learn the latest information about special education laws and regulations. Normal school faculties also recommend that general secondary schools and two-year regular college students create a special education curriculum for students that can be shared among special education educators. To reverse the loss of special education teachers, workers need to advocate for improved income levels and social status for the profession. One normal school dean indicates that high-quality teachers are essential to such efforts: “To give disabled children a better education, there is the need to improve their learning environment and to improve the quality of textbooks, assistive technology, and classroom equipment. It takes great teachers to make that possible” (June, 2009).

The Future of ECCE in China

In May 2010, Professor Dong Yin of the Institute of Psychology at Renming University of China interviewed Professor Xiao Fei of Beijing Normal University. When asked about the future of early childhood education, Dr. Fei responded, “With the improvement in the level of civilization, more and more organizations realize the importance of early intervention or early education to carry out [personal and national goals]. Parents realize that intervention, as early as possible, takes careful guidance. Related institutions (kindergartens) are more and more willing to accept children with special needs, and [these institutions are] becoming more professional. As for . . . special education abroad . . . we have also [made progress]. At least now in academic research, an international gap basically does not exist. Currently [in] special education, one is constrained by the level of economic development . . . [and by] the general public’s understanding of the level of children with special needs; [attention to these areas is] needed to solve future problems. In addition, many times, China’s laws or principles lack the power of enforcement, and details need to be thought through” (May, 2010).

Chinese families speak about the “4 + 2” for each child, interpreted to mean four grandparents and two parents who are devoting resources to a single child. In some urban areas, very young children attend boarding schools for a portion of the week while their parents commute to work. A teacher at the Jukai Kindergarten in Guangzhou said, “Our school is a second home to about a third of the children. Their parents work long days, and children are here from Monday until Thursday. Then they go home with the parents. They are happy to go home and they’re happy to come back to school” (July, 2009).

Education reforms in China reflect international trends, including the increased inclusion of children with special needs. Forlin (2010) suggests that fully supporting reform through an inclusive approach to working with children with disabilities in the regular classroom “requires a transformation in curriculum; the development of appropriate policy at both a national and school level; the provision of relevant support; and opportunities for both academic and social inclusion. Becoming an inclusive practitioner requires teachers to be able to modify the curriculum, their pedagogy and assessment procedures, and inclusion requires a functional multi-agency collaboration to ensure appropriate support for all students” (p. 177). Additionally, it is generally accepted that ECCE “inclusive programs [should] build on traditional child care practices, respect children’s linguistic and cultural diversity, and mainstream children with special educational needs and disabilities” (UNESCO 2006, p. 19).

Special education is a key area. Ministry of Education data show that at the end of 2000, China had 1,539 special education schools with 37.7 million students; 4.3 million special education teachers staff, including up to 3.1 million full-time staff; and a large number of special education teachers in regular classes in ordinary schools. Universal compulsory education for children with disabilities is still a focus of development. The effectiveness of any education system is determined by reviewing a variety of services, including the capacity of staff. China’s special education “teacher first” policy is intended to build a sufficient quantity and quality of qualified special education teachers.

Although challenges exist, teacher education programs in China strive to prepare teachers with the appropriate knowledge and dispositions to work with children with exceptionalities and to develop the requisite skills to adapt and modify curricula. Pedagogies in current teacher education and training programs include constructivist methodologies. Teacher training features field sites to establish the necessary dialogue to develop knowledge, skills, and understanding about the ideology of inclusive practices that can be implemented with large numbers of children in Chinese classrooms (Forlin 2010).

Research to determine evidence-based practice is important. Dr. Fei of Beijing Normal University says, “Of course there are many related research projects. An example of relevant research . . . is the study of special education students learning in regular classes . . . [There are] pros and cons of such a resettlement. There is an affirmative educational effect of this arrangement of mainstreaming children” (May 2010). Further, as China’s efforts in ECCE look to international advocacy and long-range plans, China’s educators remain constant in improving programs and aligning

practices with the Education for All (EFA) goal of UNESCO, focusing on equity and inclusion. EFA goals are being monitored with a 2015 timeline to achieve objectives related to equity and inclusion.

Conclusion

Education for all and education according to one's needs and potentials is congruent with Chinese philosophy. Lau and Yuen (2010, p. 125) assert that in Chinese society, the "way people with special needs are met in modern society is also an important indicator of the quality of life. The effective execution of special education requires strong cooperation among students, parents, schools, and the general public". Policies "that reach out to the excluded and improve the quality, flexibility and relevance of education" are strongly suggested by UNESCO (2006, p. 2). Meeting the needs of each child in China will require efforts in teacher recruitment, training, professional development, and pre-service education, including on-the-job practice in working with children with disabilities. Advocating for more incentives for teachers working in difficult contexts is a priority of university faculty in teacher preparation programs.

Although China does not have a high number of public special education schools that serve children with disabilities, the country has made significant progress in some areas of special education. A number of policies have been introduced on behalf of children with disabilities. Mainstreaming is currently the primary mode of providing educational opportunities to children with disabilities who live in remote areas. Guidance and oversight to ensure the healthy development of each child has been implemented.

However, a significant number of special education problems cannot be ignored. For example, about 80 % of China's population lives in remote and rural areas with high poverty. Only a few special education schools and teachers are present in these areas, the quality of special education is generally low, and most rural families cannot afford the cost of education for their learning-disabled children. To change this situation, China will need to improve the social status, working conditions, and treatment of those who work in special education while improving the quality of special education teachers through on-the-job training and proper evaluation. Further, it is important to establish clear and authoritative identification of standards and assessment tools—and to be creative and strategic in providing training for professionals.

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