Chinese teachers’ perspective on integrating autistic children in mainstream primary school classes

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Abstract. This research aimed to investigate teachers’ perceptions of inclusive education, with the understanding that the sociocultural backdrop to inclusive education is crucial to ensure its efficiency. Interpretivist paradigm was adopted, and qualitative study design was used. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with six Chinese school teachers from various mainstream schools that provided inclusive education. It was found that respondents believed that inclusive education results in development of social skills of the students. It was also found that inclusive education helps autistic children interacting with others, shunning their inhibitions, and making friends. The results also confirmed challenges of inclusive education wherein respondents listed several attitudinal and behavioural challenges associated with social stigma and bullying, and difficulty in schools.

1. Introduction

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social interaction and communication, as well as repetitive behaviors. It affects approximately 1% of the global population (Sheikh, 2019). It is estimated that one in 143 children in China has been diagnosed with autism (Sheikh, 2019). In practice, however, it would be a great challenge for them to be genuinely taken into consideration and have their needs met (Deng, M. and Poon-McBrayer, 2012). Many studies conducted so far have mainly focused on exploring inclusive education for autistic children in the western world, such as parents’ attitude towards it (Paseka and Schwab, 2020), policies and effectiveness (Lindsay, 2007; Grönlund et al., 2010) and perceived opportunities and challenges (Mitiku et al., 2014).

Although autism has been recognized in China since the 1980s, it was only in 2009 that the first national policy on autism was issued according to Xu et al. (2018). The current Chinese government’s policy aims to provide autistic children with equal opportunities for education and employment while providing them with specialized education and treatment services. However, despite these efforts there is still a lack of research on how teachers perceive mainstreaming autistic students into their classes – especially when it comes to underdeveloped contexts like China. It is for this reason that this research seeks to address the gaps in existing literature.

Inclusive education is an educational approach that aims to promote the inclusion of all children and young people with special needs in regular education programs, together with their peers (Olusanya et al., 2022). Children with disabilities and speakers of minority languages will be included in the same classrooms, in the same schools, under inclusive education.

This research aims to investigate teachers’ perceptions of inclusive education, with the understanding that the socio-cultural backdrop to inclusive education is crucial to ensure its efficiency. Its purpose is to contribute to the scant literature in the field and add to the existing body of knowledge on inclusive education for autism in mainland China’s primary schools, by exploring teachers’ perceptions of the current state of inclusive education, and opportunities to improve its efficiency. Specific objectives are presented as follows: (1) To examine Chinese teacher s’ perception of inclusive education for autistic children, benefits and challenges. (2) To explore classroom management strategies used by Chinese teachers for including autistic children in mainstream classes. (3) To identify what the Chinese teachers believe would be helpful for promoting inclusive education for autistic children in Chinese primary schools.

2. Related work

2.1. Inclusive education

According to Mittler (2012) and Florian (2014), inclusive education is a work in progress and a philosophy that opposes exclusionary practices.

The inclusive approach seeks to create schools where all students have an equal opportunity to participate in school life and are treated as valuable members of the community. The inclusive approach has been adopted in many countries around the world including Australia,
Canada, Finland, Germany, New Zealand and Sweden (Armstrong, Armstrong and Barton, 2016) [4]. This approach encourages teachers to use a variety of teaching methods such as whole class teaching strategies; it also provides opportunities for students with disabilities or special needs by providing them with assistive devices or services (Morina, 2017). Furthermore, some authors highlight the political nature of inclusive education and called on teachers and students to innovate and change [2][5]. Unfortunately, even though an increasing number of nations and organisations have stated that they support inclusive education, it is unclear to what extent and exactly what kind of inclusion has been realised. In addition, there are reports of autistic students being tormented in regular schools by classmates and even teachers (Brede et al., 2017). These disturbing reports make the academic community and the general public reevaluate the value of inclusive education, particularly for children with special needs (Pellicano, Bolte and Stahmer, 2018). In addition, Baron-Cohen et al. [6] explored whether children on the autism spectrum can be taught to recognize emotions, and studied corresponding teaching methods and their effectiveness. Baron-Cohen et al. [7] revised the Mind Through the Eyes test and used it to study mental understanding in normal adults, people with Asperger syndrome, and people with high-functioning autism. Batten and Daly [8] analyze the reality of autism education in Scotland and the impact this has on families, calling for changes in the education system to accommodate children with autism. Block and Obrusnikova [9] reviewed the literature on inclusion in physical education from 1995 to 2005 and explored the practice and research of inclusive physical education. Bondy and Fros [10] detailed the principles and practical applications of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).

2.2. Autistic children and their needs

To make sure children with special needs become independent and effective members of their communities, it is essential to identify their requirements and organize suitable educational settings. The most extensively utilized approach is inclusive education, which enrolls these students in regular classes (Gevalada and Qinyi, 2012). The accomplishment of this setup relies on the joint actions of educators, administrators, caregivers, typical peers and the students themselves; as well as public awareness of these learners’ demands and proper organization of administration and teaching activities. Moreover, adequate behavioral management and support from special education services are indispensable for success (Bubpha, Erawan and Saitong, 2012). Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way people communicate and interact with others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals on the autism spectrum have specific learning needs that are different from those of typical learners. These include difficulties in social communication, social skills, sensory processing and attention, as well as repetitive behaviours (Mitchell, 2014). As such, inclusion should be tailored to meet the needs of individuals with autism.

Inclusion aims to identify, understand and break down barriers to participation and belonging, so that the whole experience of people on the autism spectrum and their families is improved (Camargo et al., 2014). This process goes further than education alone; it calls for changes to the learning environment and how staff interact. To achieve this, a transactional approach should be taken into account as autism affects communication between people and learning develops socially, often through transactions (Jordan and Powell, 1995; Prizant and Rubin, 1999). This two-way process requires typically developing people to modify their communication styles and learning environments to suit each individual's needs (Jordan, 2005). Hence, inclusion refers to educating in a manner that takes into consideration the specific needs of each person and requires educators be flexible about curriculum delivery as well as adapting routines and physical settings.

2.3. Literature gap and research questions

The goal of this research has been to fill two significant gaps in the literature: first, there has been a lot of attention paid to the difficulties teachers face when trying to include a child with ASD or their perspectives on inclusion; less attention has been given to the methods they employ, or their inclusive pedagogy (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011), for use in regular classes. Second, historically, inclusion has been viewed as nothing more than placing a child with a disability in a regular classroom, instead of them being viewed as an integral part of it (Guralnick et al., 2007). This study tries to fill up some of the highlighted research gaps. The experiences and viewpoints of autistic children who have attended inclusive schools make up the first gap. The instructors’ attitudes, behaviours, and viewpoints regarding the inclusive education of children with special needs make up the second gap.

In some countries there may be legislation requiring schools to provide services for disabled pupils but this does not extend across all countries so parents may still find themselves struggling with the education of their children with special needs. In China, specifically, there is not only a lack of pervasive inclusive education, but there is also a lack of research on the few inclusive practices for education of developmentally disabled children. The inclusion of autistic students in mainstream classrooms can be challenging for both teachers and parents as they try to find ways to support the child’s learning experience while also ensuring that the child is able to participate fully in class activities. The attitudes, behaviours and perspectives of teachers play an important role when it comes to inclusive education for special needs students; however, there is currently little research into what factors influence teacher attitudes towards inclusive education in China. This is exactly what this research attempts to address.

The research, therefore, works on addressing following research Questions
RQ1: What are the perceived benefits and challenges of including autistic children in mainstream classes in Chinese primary school?
RQ2: What classroom management strategies are used by Chinese teachers for including autistic children in mainstream classes?
RQ3: What are the perceived effective approaches to promoting inclusive education for autistic children in Chinese primary schools?

3. Research Methodology

The interpretivist paradigm considers the subjective experiences of human beings in a socially connected world, positing that individuals interpret their environment through their own subjective experiences and understanding (Hammersley, 2012). Within the interpretivist paradigm, researchers adopt a relativist ontology, which rejects the idea of a verifiable truth. In this present research, since the investigation was regarding teachers’ perspectives – which are based on their subjective experiences, there is no verifiable truth. It is because of these specific aspects of the research that the interpretivist paradigm was considered appropriate for this research.

Considering how the interpretivist paradigm is critical in this research, it employed the qualitative study design. Qualitative research is best suited for studies that have the necessity of relying on respondents’ subjective experiences of natural phenomena, which can be elicited through formal interviews or questionnaires. This research, in particular, studied what typically occurs in the "real" world rather than what occurs under experimental conditions. For collecting data, this research study employed semi structured interviews, because it tends to combine the structure of a closed ended interview, with the openness of a free flowing one, to allow both structure and the room for the participants to discuss their opinions, perspectives and stories more freely, as Adams (2015) suggests [1].

The interview schedule was created across the four themes – each addressing one research objective. The questions themselves were framed around four themes – ‘teaching practices’, ‘learning environment’, ‘school management’ and ‘student behaviour’. The interview schedule was developed on the basis of the research questions posited in the earlier sections.

For this study, participants were recruited from Chinese school teachers from various mainstream schools that also practice inclusive education. They were then interviewed individually over the phone, through video calls or as per their convenience. A total of 6 teachers will be recruited in this research through convenience sampling. For improving the validity and reliability of this research, 50% of the participants were male and 50% of participants were female – all in the age range of 25 to 60 years of age.

Reliability in qualitative research refers to the consistency of responses to the same question framed differently. Lincoln and Guba (1985) term these methods of ensuring validity and reliability as the “trustworthiness” of the research. This trustworthiness is influenced by various factors, such as authenticity and dependability – both of which have been built into this research through the interview schedule, framing of the questions and the observations made during the interview process itself.

4. Findings

It was found that Chinese teachers considered inclusive education enhancing the social skills of the autistic students. However, autistic students had distinct academic needs and faced challenges of social stigma and bullying. Autistic students also indulged in distractive and violent behaviour. Teachers resorted to praising and motivating students, offering support and conducting regular commutation and expected school and parental support and professional training for the same.

4.1. Thematic map

A total of 4 themes emerged from the inductive thematic analysis of response of 6 Chinese teachers [3]. Themes were found associated with 12 sub-themes. Thematic map has been displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Thematic map highlighting themes

4.2. Theme 1: Development of social skill

The first theme dealt with the Chinese teachers’ perceptions of inclusive education and its benefits. The theme was supported by three sub-themes (Figure 2).

Participants in the study opined that inclusive education would result in increased acceptance of peers with difference as it would enhance the understanding about others and bring the desired flexibility in the approach of students that would also facilitate the feeling of helping others among students.

The results indicated that participants acknowledged that inclusive education helps autistic children interacting with others, shunning their inhibitions, and making friends. They start communicating with others, rather than being in self. Respondents commented that not only, behaviour of the autistic child can get positively affected; but other children in the class can also exhibit patience and flexibility in their behaviour.
The next sub-theme identified through thematic analysis dealt with enhanced self-esteem of the autistic child. Respondents acknowledged that due to inclusive education, a child encounters positive experience that make the former feel valued, which results in child’s enhanced confidence and self-esteem.

4.3. Theme 2: Attitudinal and behavioural challenges

The second theme catered to the challenges of inclusive education for autistic children (Figure 3).

Most of the respondents agreed that autistic children in inclusive education suffered from social stigma and bullying due to negative attitude of people, that also affected the mental health of the autistic children.

Another challenge highlighted by participants dealt with the distinct academic needs of the autistic children. Participants revealed that autistic children are not able to study in noisy class rooms.

The most common problem cited by almost all the respondents was related to class distraction and violent behaviour. Respondents acknowledged that autistic students did not sit quietly in the class, disturbed other students, hurt/beat other children and teachers, due to which concentration and effectiveness in the class was a major issue.

4.4. Theme 3: Individualized attention and support

Next theme dealt with class room management strategies used by the Chinese teachers for promoting inclusive education for autistic children (Figure 4).

The most common strategy adopted by Chinese teachers included praising and motivating the autistic child. They resorted to engage the autistic children in the interesting tasks so that they may participate more in the class.

Another strategy adopted by teachers included establishing regular communication with the parents and counsellor so that needed directions about children engagement in the class can be given and performance could be improved.

Offering the academic support and ensuring the integration with the class was another strategy used by the Chinese teachers. They acknowledged helping such students before the class and offering after school tutoring.

4.5. Theme 4: Guidance and cooperation

Another theme emerging from the thematic analysis catered to the objective of promoting inclusive education for autistic children in Chinese primary schools (figure 5.)

Respondents believed that in order to promote inclusive education for autistic children, they needed cooperation both from the school and parents. They opined that it is difficult to manage many autistic children in one class as not only the needs of autistic children are different, but also, they behave irrationally and erratically in the class, thereby disturbing their teaching and overall decorum of the class. So, they must be put in different classes.

There was a clear indication that participants were although aware of autism, but their knowledge about the exposure, experience and skills and attributes needed to deal with the autistic students were not adequate. This lack of awareness can also affect their teaching principles, strategies, and approaches to dealing with general behavioural problems of the autistic students, as well as their flexibility to adapt to the individual
differences of students. Similarly, participants expressed that it is also important to popularize the concept of autism so that it might lead to inclusion rather than exclusion.

Professional advice was found as another sub-theme highlighting that in order to promote inclusive education for autistic children in Chinese primary school, teachers must be given professional advice or training about the dealing of such students in the class. This becomes essentially important as majority of the teachers accepted feeling anxious, powerless, uncertain, and overwhelmed while having an autistic child in their mainstream classroom. So, most of the participants acknowledged that it is essential to have professional training about dealing with autistic children.

5. Discussion

5.1. Perception of inclusive education for autistic children, benefits and challenges

The first objective of the study aimed to examine Chinese teachers’ perception of inclusive education for autistic children, benefits and challenges. Thematic analysis revealed that respondents believed that promoting inclusive educational for autistic children would yield in development of social skill. Children may be more likely to adapt to their surroundings, enhance their social skills through social interactions, and do better academically as a result of inclusive education. So, the result of this study also informing the development of social skill aligns well with the previous studies.

Thematic analysis also revealed salient attitudinal and behavioral challenges encountered while promoting inclusive education. It was found that autistic children in inclusive education suffered from social stigma and bullying due to negative attitude of people, that also affect the mental health of the autistic children. The prejudiced attitude against autistic children was more prevalent in older classes or age groups, due to which other students did not wish to befriend them and play with them.

Another challenge in inclusive education stems from distinct needs autistic children wherein autistic children are not able to study in noisy class rooms. Also, limited understanding of autistic children about the academic tasks and lack of interpersonal interactions of autistic students further strengthened the needs for special education for such children. Such issues of ASD students can be understood by appreciating the fact that autism is a neurological disorder characterized by issues with social interaction, communication, and recurrent behaviours, as suggested by (Sheikh, 2019) and Mitiku et al. (2014).

5.2. Classroom management strategies for including autistic children

The second objective of the study aimed to explore classroom management strategies used by Chinese teachers for including autistic children in mainstream classes. Class room management strategies used by the Chinese teachers for promoting inclusive education for autistic children focused upon giving individualized attention and support. Similar to the results of the present study, previously, Morina (2017) has also acknowledged the supportive role of the teachers wherein teachers are known to use variety of teaching methods to offer the opportunities for students with disabilities or special needs. The first strategy adopted by Chinese teachers was praising and motivating the child to engage in interesting tasks to enhance their participation in the class. Another strategy was establishing regular communication with the parents and counsellor so that needed directions about children engagement in the class can be given and performance could be improved.

5.3. Promoting inclusive education for autistic children

The last objective of the study dealt with identifying measures that would be helpful for promoting inclusive education for autistic children in Chinese primary schools. Thematic analysis revealed that Chinese teacher relied upon guidance and cooperation for promoting the integration of autistic children in mainstream education. Respondents believed that in order to promote inclusive education for autistic children, they needed cooperation both from the school and parents.

It is pertinent to note here that respondents in the present study although listed several benefits of inclusive education, but at the same time also criticized autistic children’s class behaviour, affecting their teaching. They asserted that it is difficult to manage many autistic children in one class as not only the needs of autistic children are different, but also, they behave irrationally and erratically in the class, thereby disturbing their teaching and overall decorum of the class. So, they must be put in different classes. Respondents in the study acknowledged that support of school counsellor, shadow teacher and parents in handling autistic children.

It was found that teachers’ knowledge, exposure, experience and skills and attributes needed to deal with the autistic students were not adequate. This must be understood that lack of awareness about handling autistic students affect the teaching principles, strategies, and approaches to dealing with general behavioral problems of the autistic students. The results of the study revealed that lack of awareness was not confined to the teachers only, but other students also lacked this information.

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate Chinese teachers’ perceptions of inclusive education. A study with interpretivist philosophical stance was conducted wherein interview of 6 Chinese teachers with the experience of inclusive education was conducted and results were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis yielded four themes and 12 sub-themes. Referring to Chinese teachers’ perception and benefits of inclusive education, it was found that respondents
believed that inclusive education results in development of social skills of the students. Owing to increased acceptance of peers with difference, there is an enhanced understanding about others that facilitates the desired flexibility in the approach of students resulting in feeling of helping others. It was also found that inclusive education helps autistic children interacting with others, shunning their inhibitions, and making friends. The results also validated that due to inclusive education, a child encounters positive experience that make the former feel valued, which results in child’s enhanced confidence and self-esteem. The results also confirmed challenges of inclusive education wherein respondents listed several attitudinal and behavioral challenges.

The results of the present study imply that despite pushing for an inclusive education in China, the process of doing so is not a smooth course of action wherein both students and teachers face significant challenges. Teachers in classes having autistic students face significant challenges in terms of discipline and decorum, that eventually affect their teaching. These issues have also been listed by previous researchers and this study also reveals similar results. The results point to the direction of significant policy formulation and implementation gaps. So, simply devising a policy for integrating ASD students in mainstream education is not enough, rather the government should also work towards making such initiatives truly effective by understanding the differences or conflicts at individual, group, institutional and cultural level.

Future researchers are recommended to ascertain the relationships among identified constructs through an empirical study. The results of this study are based upon the responses of only 8 Chinese teachers, other researchers are recommended to replicate the study with increased sample size.

Future researchers must also study the alternative learning standards, assessment methods, curriculum design and instructional pedagogy needed for ASD students to make the inclusive education more effective. This study highlighted the lack of awareness about ASD and dealing ASD students in mainstream classes. Given this scenario, future researchers can work towards identifying the bases of equitable education and social justice to enhance the awareness about ASD and importance of inclusive education.

References