

‘Teachers Did Not Let Me Do It.’: Disabled Children’s Experiences of Marginalisation in Regular Primary Schools in China

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The large-scale mainstreaming of disabled children in education in China was initiated with the launching of a national policy called ‘Learning in Regular Classrooms’ in the late 1980s. More than thirty years on, and little is known about disabled children’s daily experiences in regular schools due to a lack of research that foregrounds their voices. This paper reports the main findings from an ethnographic study conducted in 4 state-funded primary schools in Shanghai involving 11 children labelled as having ‘intellectual disabilities’, 10 class teachers and 3 resource teachers. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and child-friendly participatory activities, and thematically analysed to identify patterns in practices and beliefs that underpin the processes of inclusion and exclusion. The research found that the child participants were facing marginalisation in many aspects of school life with rather limited participation in decision-making. The exclusionary processes were reinforced by a prevailing special educational thinking and practice, a charitable approach to the disadvantaged in a Confucian society, and an extremely competitive and performative schooling culture. The findings address the need to hear disabled children’s voices to initiate a paradigm shift in understanding and practice to counterbalance deep-rooted barriers. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Inclusive education, special education, disability, children’s voices, China, global South

Introduction

Despite its rapid economic growth, China’s status as a developing country remains with low per capital income and staggering inequality (Knight, 2014). Improving circumstances for disabled people has been a forgotten agenda, and they have been subjected to lower rates of school enrolment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2006). China was among the first countries to endorse the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) which campaigned internationally for prioritising inclusive schooling, however, ensuring disabled children’s access to inclusive provision remains far from being realised (Yao et al., 2018). Gaining a deeper understanding

of local processes is vital to developing effective approaches (Bines & Lei, 2011).

The context: integrating disabled children into regular schools

The modern term of ‘disability’ (*canji*) gained popularity through a massive process of medicalisation to regulate those perceived as different in Chinese society (Kohrman, 2005). Disability is currently classified into 6 categories: visual, hearing, speech, physical, intellectual, and psychiatric disabilities, and identification is largely determined by medical diagnosis. China operates a special education system for disabled children with placement options as: regular classes in regular schools; special classes in regular schools; special schools; and home-schooling. Goodley’s (2010) observation applies - when the country’s system was redesigned in the early 1950s, ‘blind, deaf and mute’ children were not considered to be eligible recipients of regular education (Government Administrative Council, 1951). To date, disabled children are the only group that can be legitimately excluded from regular schools based on body difference.

The large-scale mainstreaming of disabled children in education, started in the late 1980s, with the implementation of a policy called ‘Learning in Regular Classrooms’ (LRC, *suibanjiudu*). It mainly served as a cost-effective strategy to expand compulsory education given that limited resources were available to open more special schools promptly (Ministry of Education et al., 1989). In the same year of China’s endorsement of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), an ‘inclusive’ turn followed in its policy discourse to reframe LRC as a local initiative for inclusion (MoE, 1994). The statistics show that in 2019 nearly 49.15% of registered disabled children were placed in regular classes in regular schools at compulsory primary and junior secondary level (MoE, 2020). Nevertheless, concerns over low quality of teaching and incidents of neglect in regular schools were raised (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Surveys of regular teachers’ attitudes towards disabled children indicated a resistance to inclusion, for example, many teachers noted that inclusion was not feasible in Chinese context and a special school should be the right place for a disabled child (Feng, 2010; Ma & Tan, 2010). The slow progress of improving disabled children’s access to inclusive education might be a result of issues such as the shortage of guidance for practice and policies that maintain the exclusion of disabled children, including their conditional rights to access regular schools, the increasing funding to open resource classrooms in regular schools (where pull-out activities are organised for disabled children), and the positioning of special educators and specialists as sources of expert knowledge (State Council, 2017). Most studies conducted in China on the implementation of inclusive education were informed by a med-psycho model of disability-‘problems’ were located within children, and opinions on children were sought from professionals (see Xu & Cooper, 2020). Little is known about ‘included’ disabled children’s experiences and their views of barriers to inclusion. Internationally, researchers have been advocating for the involvement of children in the knowledge production of inclusive education (Carpenter & McConkey, 2012). Disrupting the silence of disabled children in China is crucial

to realising their rights as social actors, and we could be confident that inclusive education has been achieved only if it is validated by children's daily experiences of schooling.

Positioning disabled children's voices

The political struggles and rights movements of disabled people have given rise to a shift in the understanding of the relationship between disability and impairment (e.g. Oliver, 1990). While debates over models of disability persist, a significant implication of this work in education is to challenge a pathological view that attributes 'educational difficulties' solely to children, and to shift the focus to the construction of an inclusive educational environment. Inclusive education is a radical redirection of education development to welcome and celebrate all differences (Vislie, 2003). Nevertheless, it is known that discrimination and exclusion continue in reality (e.g. Davis & Watson, 2000), indicating the importance of building better knowledge of how to initiate change in practice.

The international movement of student voice has been supported by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and the new childhood sociology, which challenge a view that children are incompetent, that their views are invalid, and that to become adults they can only wait passively to acquire knowledge through education (Greenstein, 2016). The notion of 'voice', I argue, should not be restricted to what is verbally 'spoken' or 'heard', but should also address the conveying of meanings, understandings, intentions and wants by all possible communicative means. Curran and Runswick-Cole (2014) observed that much research on children's voices did not necessarily consider the place of disabled children. Assumed to be the least competent, they tend to face extra barriers to participation for being children and being disabled (Tisdall, 2012). In the global South, disabled children's voices seem to be much less likely to be the focus of research (Singal & Muthukrishna, 2014).

This paper will report some of the main findings from my doctoral project 'Imagining Inclusive Schooling' which I completed at the University of Edinburgh, and which explored the situation of disabled children in Chinese regular schools through an ethnographic inquiry (fully described in Wang, 2016). I grew up in China, and after witnessing segregation and maltreatments against disabled children as a volunteer teacher in Shanghai, I became critical of the dominating deficit-based practice that denies their rights to inclusive education. Before commencing the study, I was unable to identify any research that highlighted what disabled children had to say about their schooling, a gap in research recently noted again by Ma (2020). To address this gap, I drew on perspectives from northern scholars' work in areas of inclusive pedagogy, childhood studies, disability studies and student voice, given the absence of relevant research conducted in China. Using an ethnographic approach, I exercised reflexivity to critically evaluate my role in the research process (see more in Wang, 2016). My active negotiation of the research-member relationship was a complex and fluid process, which could not be described through a dichotomy of insider or outsider. I drew on my own aspirations to

belong to seek connections with children and balance power relations (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). This inquiry aimed to contribute to the international literature on disabled children's educational inclusion and to inform new approaches to develop practice. It was intended to be a humble attempt to shed light on what could be done differently, and open a space for dialogue, collaborations and further inquiries.

Methodology

In this study, I adopted a starting point of full recognition of disabled children's competence and agency, striving to construct an enabling space in which children would feel safe, engaged, and supported to express their views. I considered an ethnographic approach as the most appropriate to gain in-depth and holistic understanding of how disabled children and their teachers engaged in meaning construction to negotiate inclusion in daily schooling. The approach is particularly suitable for researching with children to support flexibility, openness, rapport-building and empowerment, which also allows the usage of multiple methods to be responsive to a child's individuality. The research questions were formulated as below to guide the inquiry process. Instead of using 'inclusion', I used 'learning and participation' to emphasise that inclusive education should not be only about social acceptance without support for learning. The term 'participation' recognises children's active role in the schooling process (Black-Hawkins, 2010):

1. How do disabled children (designated as LRC students) understand, experience and negotiate their learning and participation in regular schools in Shanghai?
2. How do teachers, being significant adults for children, perceive and negotiate the learning and participation of disabled children (designated as LRC students)?
3. What are the facilitators of and barriers to disabled children's learning and participation in regular schools?

Gaining access

I conducted the fieldwork in one urban district in Shanghai. Convenience sampling was used to maximise my opportunities to learn (Stake, 2006). The first group of schools that rolled out resource classrooms were contacted, and 4 state-funded comprehensive primary schools agreed to participate. Teachers' informed consent was gained through face-to-face meetings. Parents of potential child participants received informed consent letters forwarded by teachers, with my contact details to discuss any concerns they might have. Through the schools' platforms for online communication with families, parents of other students received information about me carrying out a general educational research project without revealing its focus on any particular child. To gain informed consent from disabled children, I used a child-friendly leaflet with simple language and pictures, which contained key information about the project and their rights to withdraw at any point. I explained to them that the research was not schoolwork or

any form of punishment. They were invited to try out the camera on my mobile phone and a digital recorder I was going to use. I encouraged them to ask me any questions and reassured them that it was okay to say no. From the 4 schools, 11 children (who mainly use verbal communication) labelled as having ‘mild/moderate/severe intellectual disabilities’ (based on DSM-IV’s diagnostic criteria of ‘mental retardation’), 10 regular class teachers (*banzhuren*) and 3 resource classroom teachers (*ziyuan jiaoshi*) who were working with the child participants agreed to take part in the study. Table 1 provides basic demographic information of the participants. I use pseudonyms throughout this article to conceal the participants’ identities. I mark the teacher participants, who are all female, by adding the title ‘Ms’.

Name	Age	Gender	Category (LD)	Class teacher (name, years of teaching, special/inclusive education training)	Resource teacher (years of teaching, special/inclusive training)
Sha	10	Female	Mild	Ms Ding, 26, none	Ms Zhang, 23, resource teacher
Qi	10	Male	Moderate	Ms Xia, 6, special education	Ms Zhang
Ting	9	Female	Moderate	Ms Cui, 14, none	Ms Zhao, 20, none
Li	9	Female	Mild	Ms Ruan, 18, none	Ms Zhao
Xin	11	Female	Mild	Ms Jia, 17, none	Ms Zhao
Dan	11	Female	Mild	Ms Shen, 22, none	N/A
Lulu	12	Female	Mild	Ms Shen	N/A
Ning	11	Female	Mild	Ms Ai, 20, none	Ms Guan, 28, resource teacher
Wu	10	Male	Moderate	Ms Qian, 1.5, none	Ms Guan
Rui	9	Male	Mild	Ms Dai, 5, none	Ms Guan
Lian	10	Female	Severe	Ms Jun, 15, none	Ms Guan

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

Fieldwork

I drew on the Framework for Participation (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) which was designed to assist researchers to collect information on policies, practices and cultures that support or impede children’s learning and participation. This framework was chosen for its ability to assist in working through the potentially overwhelming developments in the field, to help reduce omissions, and indicate what to look for. It does not serve as a simplistic checklist or impose any assumed model of practice, but can be used flexibly to cater to specific research focus, which also accommodates various methods and enables open-ended questions of local

realities (Black-Hawkins, 2010). The framework was not solely set out for the purpose of listening to children. Therefore, I added a set of questions to explore, for instance, whether disabled children participated in decision-making, and how teachers learned from children. Aware of the differences between northern schooling practices and the Chinese educational context, such as the availability of pastoral care and the deployment of teaching assistants, I did not rigidly follow the guiding questions of the framework and ensured that coverage of unique aspects of Chinese school life, such as children's participation in cleaning their classrooms (*zhiri*).

Multiple methods were used during data collection. I conducted continuous and unstructured observation to complement the limitations of the interview method by expanding the depth and the breath of children's data. Over one semester, I visited the schools every day and wrote up field notes to describe my observation of the lessons (including all subjects) and activities the child participants took part in, with a focus on their interactions with other school members. I incorporated my actions and emotional responses in the fieldnotes, and kept a diary to record more personal experiences. I took photos of everyday scenes when appropriate as interview prompts later to help children recall lessons, activities and people. Inspired by the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011), I used a variety of participatory activities to encourage children to express their opinions and feelings: the child participants were each invited to take me on a tour around the campus to photograph places they liked or disliked (Stalker, 1998), which took around 30 minutes. I asked them follow-up questions such as 'Why do you like this place? Who would come here with you?'. They each participated in short sessions of photo-elicitation interviews (20-30 minutes), prompted with sorting and ranking the photos I took under three categories, 'good', 'bad', and 'unsure' (Porter et al., 2008); and their wishes for change were elicited in an activity named 'seed in a pot', a cultural adaption of 'message in the bottle' (Messiou, 2012). Symbol signs were available during these activities, including 'happy face', 'sad face', 'question mark' to raise questions, and 'red stop' to indicate unwillingness to continue or answer any question. I kept the dialogues practical and relevant to their daily lives. Their positive experiences and aspirations were sought as well as any difficulties they were facing. Further techniques were used to facilitate communication, such as giving extra time, having breaks, and asking open questions while using specific questions for clarification or confirmation to support children with filling in details. Children's responses were recorded using a digital recorder, and I also took notes of their reactions. I conducted semi-structured interviews with individual teacher participants, so they could have a non-judgemental environment to discuss their perspectives of the educational provision for disabled children. Their perspectives were respected, recognising that everyone including teachers should feel empowered and heard. All the interviews with teachers, lasted from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours, were recorded with a digital recorder except one teacher who preferred note-taking.

I finished the fieldwork with 84 days of fieldnotes, 39 short recordings of guided tours, 25 slots of interview recordings with children, 13 interview recordings with teachers (one in the form

of notes), and 19 diary entries. The photo prompts were not treated as data. I did not interpret the meanings of the images, and only included recorded responses from the child participants. I worked with the original language- Mandarin- to retain cultural meanings, and only translated the excerpts used to present findings into English. I indexed the observational data so that events or dialogues involving a certain participant could be easily located, which facilitated cross-checking between the fieldnotes and the interview transcripts. The process of analysis was informed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With the assistance of NVivo 10, I carried out systematic analysis through coding, identifying significant events, and integrating data sets using a strategy to identify 'pathways' (Strøm & Fagermoen, 2012). I drew on the notion of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure the quality of the inquiry. Triangulation of methods and data sources was applied, for instance, I examined what had been shared and what was perceived as different from children and teachers.

The research followed the British Educational Research Association's ethical guideline at the time (BERA, 2011), and gained approval of the ethical committee of Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh. Ensuring an ethical approach relative to the specific research context involved more contested issues. First, I utilised an 'ethical radar' to ensure sensitivity towards children's consent as an on-going process (Skånfors, 2009). They were consulted about their preferred place and time for research activities and reminded of their rights to withdrawal. Silence was fully accepted and carefully interpreted (Lewis, 2010). The interview questions were framed deliberately to give space to children to choose whether they would like to discuss any potentially distressing experience, for instance, instead of 'asking questions like 'Have you been bullied before?', I asked 'Have other students done anything that you did not like so much?'. Second, due to disability stigma in Chinese society, and also to accommodate the schools and the parents of the child participants, I was obliged to be discreet in order to avoid breaching such information. This was a very different approach compared to research conducted in northern contexts, where disabled children can even be asked to directly comment on labels and identities (see for example Kelly & Norwich, 2004). Following a northern normative ethical practice - not withholding any information - in this context could have potentially caused more harm to the child participants (e.g. name-calling), who were not informed by their families about the disability labels ascribed to them. The child participants were still fully informed of all important aspects such as what the research entailed, the issues of confidentiality and their right to withdraw. Due to the limitation of space, a much more detailed description of methodological and ethical considerations can be found in the project's full report (Wang, 2016).

Findings

The child participants welcomed the chance to share their experiences in a supportive environment and showed great sensitivity towards the circumstances they were living in. The findings reported here will focus on the salient barriers to the child participants' learning and

participation. Children's experiences are foregrounded and teachers' accounts are included to provide insights into the rationale of exclusionary practice. The study has also identified inclusive practice and positive experiences which evidenced the possibilities towards inclusion, which are not presented in this article (Wang, 2016).

The promotion of special educational thinking and practice

The child participants valued togetherness (*yiqi*), positive relationships with teachers and peers, opportunities to contribute to a community (*jiti*), and fairness for everyone. However, many of them were subjected to incidents of marginalisation. None of them could identify any aspect of school life in which s/he made decisions, commenting that teachers and other students such as the 'student cadres' (*ganbu*, youth candidates of communist cadres) were the decision-makers. They could be easily left out when completing group tasks. Some were 'loners', who did not have anyone to socialise with during breaks. Bullying also happened to all of the child participants in verbal, physical or social forms (Wang & Florian, 2019).

Teachers, many of who received no previous training on inclusive education, were introduced to a deficit model of practice underpinned by a predominant medical and psychological conceptualisation of disability. Accompanied with such labelling is the promotion of behaviour interventions in schools intended to 'fix' children through reductive techniques. For example, teachers of a class were instructed to check whether a disabled child made any eye contact with them – the child would get a reward if 3 times were reached in a lesson. Although some teacher participants felt uncomfortable with labelling, they had to obey school regulations. Ms Dai described how her view of a child seemed to be changing after designation:

If you don't tell me that he is a LRC pupil, maybe I will just teach him like a normal kid. But since you (indicating the school managers) have said so, I have to pay attention and look into him more. Then the more I looked at him, the more I felt that... he was not quite normal. But overall, if you did not tell me that we had got such a child, I would feel that everything was alright – he had no problems at all.

The quote above evidenced the potential powerful impact of labelling in making teachers wonder if a better way of educating disabled children was to treat them differently. The labels also seemed to reinforce a biased assumption of low competence of disabled children (Davis & Watson, 2000), which was often used by teachers to justify marginalisation. In a Maths lesson, Li was completely overlooked while the teacher appeared to engage well with the rest of the class. After the lesson, the teacher said to me: 'She cannot understand anything.' It was unsurprising that Li sorted the photo of this lesson into the category of 'bad' things about her school. The child participants were very aware of teachers' low expectations:

Ning: ... Like this time, the exam, I got 75 (out of 100). Then the English teacher asked

the students who failed the exam (<60) to stand up. There were two. I did not fail. I did not stand up. Ms Ai said, hmm, she (the English teacher) said it last time that you (addressing the two students) would always fail. Then she said that you failed, how couldn't you just pass for one time? She said so.

Wang: But you did quite well, right?

Ning: Yes. The teacher said nothing. But the teacher just did not know about my marks. Then she thought I passed. She thought I got 61, not 60.

Ning expressed her disappointment at not being recognised and praised for her progress in learning. Although she did well in the exam, she knew that the teacher only assumed that she would only marginally pass. Internalising the assumption and expectation of low competence, also tended to make children further withdraw from participating in activities:

Wang: We were just talking about what kind of school activities you would attend. But you said that you did not do anything.

Qi: That's right.

Wang: Why?

Qi: Why?

Wang: Yes.

Qi: Teachers did not let me do it. I cannot sing. I cannot do...I can do nothing.

The child Qi referred to teachers' comments about his competence as the reason for not joining wider activities. He also showed a distinct discrepancy between how he would like to perceive himself and how others perceived him in the school. He was often referred to by a nickname 'Mr Pacifier', first given by the headteacher when he started school to make fun of how he sucked his thumb like an infant. However, during the guided tour activity, Qi asked me to take a picture of himself posing as 'the big bear' (a cartoon character named 'Xiong Da' who was strong and furious) and said that he really preferred to be called by this name. Indeed, across lessons of various subjects taught by different teachers with diverse pedagogical approaches, a child participant's participation in learning was manifested differently. On many occasions, I observed how the same child, who was seen as incompetent, disengaged and disinterested by one teacher, then became an active learner in another lesson— paying attention to instructions and raising their hands up to answer questions. Their competence in learning and learner identities were not static or prescribed, but instead constructed through interactions with learning environments, which challenged the notion of low competence associated with disability labels.

Among all the developments relating to disabled children's educational inclusion in China, a significant change that should not be overlooked is the opening of resource classrooms. In the schools I visited, the resource classrooms, besides desks and chairs, were equipped with facilities for rehabilitation and psychological intervention (e.g. sensory integration training

equipment or a sandbox for psychoanalysis), which often attracted speculation from students about the purpose of these rooms. Disabled children could be separated from peers to have 'resource lessons' which usually involved tutoring and some play time. Despite some class teacher participants not completely agreeing with keeping children apart, others felt that such arrangement might be beneficial for disabled children because of the more relaxed atmosphere in a resource classroom, as commented by Ms Ding:

I think for these special educational needs children, a resource classroom indeed has given them a happy land, right?...Sometimes when they are... staying in the regular classrooms, she (Sha) would feel too much pressure to receive the same education with her peers, right? Because the standard is for ordinary people. They cannot meet the requirements for normal kids... In the regular classrooms, they often, like they have such poker faces.

The teacher has observed a mismatch between disabled children and the challenging standards in regular education that seemed to affect their well-being. The resource classrooms that separated disabled children from their peers, therefore became legitimised spaces for the best interests of these children. Nonetheless, the child participants showed rather mixed views about resource classrooms. Some children found the individualised tutoring to be helpful to keep up with the curriculum. They liked the resource teachers, who were often patient and approachable. However, some children felt that they missed out what was happening back in their regular classrooms. The resource classrooms were also likely to be associated with stigma. In a school, students and teachers referred to a resource classroom as one where 'bad' students ended up. Some child participants tried to keep it a secret, for example, during one resource lesson, Xin suddenly crouched down to hide under the table, saying that she was freaked out - it turned out that her classmates were walking past the corridor outside. It is also noticeable that children who were already marginalised in their regular classes, tended to show a preference for resource classrooms. For example, Qi preferred to spend time in the resource classroom where he was treated with more respect, and he commented that he would even like to turn the whole school into a huge resource classroom.

Beyond resource teachers' kind attitudes towards disabled children, the teaching practice in resource classrooms was also underpinned by an assumption of low levels of competence. For example, in a lesson, the only task was to fill in colours for two shapes of apple. Children completed this task within 2 minutes and played until the bell rang. The distinctive decoration of resource classrooms was noticed by the child participants themselves. Li pointed to the photo of the resource classroom and said: 'This is for one-year-old.' and 'I hate here (pointing at the play area)'. However, children were not able to decide whether they could attend resource lessons or not, and what should happen during these lessons. Some would pretend to have forgotten about the timetable to avoid attending resource lessons, as an attempt to exercise their agency even in a very restricted environment.

Charitable thinking and overprotection

When the teacher participants commented on the principles guiding the education of disabled children, they frequently turned to notions such as ‘caring’, ‘concerning’ or ‘looking after’ them, instead of teaching and learning. Although a sense of benevolence shared by teachers might facilitate the acceptance of disabled children’s presence in regular schools, as previously noted by other researchers (e.g. Deng & Holdsworth, 2007), this study found that the necessity to equip children with knowledge and skills was noticeably missing. Associated with the notions above, was also the underlining of protection as a priority over participation. Driven by authorities’ monitoring of safety-related incidents, measures to keep students safe were taken to a rather extreme extent in the participating schools. For instance, in one school, students were asked to only walk in line in the middle of a corridor when moving rooms so they would not bump into walls and get injured. Disabled children were seen by teachers as vulnerable, fragile and in need of protection, and they were even more likely to be subjected to excessive control, which often jeopardised their opportunities to participate in activities. For instance, Qi was removed from a school-wide choir competition for which every class would participate as a team, because his class teacher assumed that Qi might fall and hurt other children if he stood on a higher rack due to his height. Whereas other students could make their own decisions over what extra-curricular school clubs to join, most of the child participants were directly allocated to clubs that used their main classrooms without any consultation, so that there would be no safety risks had they to move to other rooms.

Competitive and performative school culture

During the fieldwork, I witnessed how children and teachers were extremely busy coping with ‘teaching to the test’. Students’ marks were constantly ranked and compared against others across classes, schools, and regions. The curriculum was often different from the timetable shown to visitors: subjects like Crafts or Art could be cancelled to give more time to subjects that matter more for the league tables, such as Maths and Chinese. While students frequently complained to me about how little time they had to play and relax, the child participants also shared their experiences: Sha noted that she would not go and bother the teachers with questions because they looked too busy, and Wu felt the same about asking for help from his classmates:

Wang: When you face difficulties, who would you turn to for help?

Wu: Look for, no one would help. Everyone is writing schoolwork. No time.

Teachers seemed to be unaware of how the child participants were less likely to get support from them and peers within such a performative and competitive schooling culture. Ms Zhao noted that it was a norm for some students to be marginalised: ‘We all choose the best, right?’

The child participants were also subjected to, and perpetuated, such culture. For example, Wu and Rui chose not to work, with Lian commenting that ‘She is not bright enough’. Therefore, marginalisation was not derived from individual children’s hostility, but the school culture in which students tended to avoid working with those perceived as ‘less able’.

Teachers, looking stressed, often lashed out at students for unsatisfying exam results. The teacher participants addressed the difficulty of coping with work conditions, such as the pressure to produce higher grades, lack of time to reflect on practice, and performance-related pay. Many teacher participants felt it a struggle to cater for all students and be attentive to children’s worlds. While teachers acknowledged that they had to compromise some children’s learning, there was also an interesting view that the labelling, which exempted disabled children’s academic performances from league tables, made them somehow entitled to a joyful childhood that other children had alarmingly missed:

Ms Ding: To tell you the truth, I have never had deep conversations with other students...But I am very close to Wu. Maybe because I have talked a lot with him, we became close. I like chatting with him. When it comes to other students, it is always about stuff like study, study and study. I mean, as teachers, we would not feel much happiness in the heart if we keep doing this. I am more relaxed when I am talking with Wu. We can talk about everything and he can say anything.

Wu nominated Ms Ding as his favourite teacher in the school, and the positive relationship with Ms Ding was invaluable given that he faced discriminatory treatment from some other teachers and students. ‘Exclusion’ from the normative schooling practices seemed to open up a space for a more meaningful education that cultivates genuine interpersonal connections.

Discussion

This study adopted a stance that positioned disabled children as agents and knowers, distinct from that of previous research related to the implementation of inclusive education in China, mainly informed by a medical-psychological model of disability and consulting professionals’ opinions. Instead, this research challenged the dominant discourse of identifying deficits within disabled children (Elder et al., 2018). It affirmed the necessity of promoting disabled children’s participation (Ravenscroft et al., 2019), surfaced the missing views of disabled children in this body of research literature and underlined barriers identified by children themselves to experience an inclusive education. The moments and events highlighted by the child participants might appear to be trivial and fleeting, however, these encounters bear significant meanings. Their often-differing views from adults’ evidenced missed opportunities for teachers to critically examine their assumptions of disabled children’s competences and wants to engage alternative, enabling and inclusive approaches in practice. While acknowledging the need to

provide more teacher training opportunities for inclusive pedagogy, I argue that disabled children themselves should be first and foremost recognised as invaluable resources already available within a school community. Combined with teachers' accounts of the rationale for marginalisation and the dilemmas to cater for all children in the current regular education system, the evidence from this research further sheds light on the very complex processes of addressing disability inclusion in the Chinese educational context. In such a context, deep-rooted and influential social and cultural barriers are at play, and this study provides much needed insights into why a reluctance to fully include disabled children in regular schools has remained, and how we could possibly move forward.

This research has identified the negative impact of replicating a model of special educational provision in regular education. In this case, as argued by Slee and Allan (2001), exclusion is reproduced rather than realising the transformative aspiration of inclusive education. The relatively new practice of disability labelling was particularly alien in a schooling context where teachers and children tended to stick together and where a strong sense of community was valued. LeTendre and Shimizu (2000) interestingly compared their observations of a special classroom in a Japanese regular school and suggested that in order to implement inclusive education, schools in eastern societies should seek more space for the 'individual'. Although this research resonates with their suggestion that differences of experiences should be attended to, I consider it rather tokenistic to replicate a model of special educational provision including differentiated treatments based on western individualism, while overlooking how to respond to the commonalities of children's aspirations and the importance of learning to live together regardless of differences. Being labelled as 'special', similar to Schauwer et al. (2009), in this study, meant that the child participants were negotiating between a world that everyone else was in, and another 'special' world perceived to be one where they should belong. They encountered a lowered expectation of competence (Davis & Watson, 2000), an infantilising approach, and overall a disrupted sense of belongingness in school communities - these experiences challenge the idea that some children must require special provision, as argued by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011). Although some researchers argued that these children preferred special provision (e.g. Prunty et al., 2012), I argue for the necessity to avoid using children's views to instrumentally justify exclusionary practices, but rather to carefully interpret children's 'choices' through a critical lens. For instance, the child participant Qi's 'choice' of the resource classroom was hardly a real one, considering how experiences of respect, support, and friendship were absent in the regular classroom. The problematic implementation of inclusive education should not be used as a reason to violate its principles (Slee, 2011).

Besides the problematic promotion of special educational practice, a charitable model of disability prevails, as found in this study. Researchers in China often attributed benevolence towards the disadvantaged in a Confucian society as a facilitator for inclusion (Yu et al., 2011). However, this research identified the counterproductive impact of charitable thinking, that

participation of the child participants was hindered in the name of caring (Unok-Marks, 2011). While it is non-disputable that schools should ensure a safe environment for all, when children's views were not consulted to inform decision-making, a discourse of safety, I argue, even if with good intentions, could be also misused to marginalise disabled children. Furthermore, the extremely competitive and performative schooling culture was identified as one of the foremost barriers to guaranteeing the equal membership of a disabled child. Being 'included' in an unchanged regular education, entails the lack of recognition of a broad range of achievements and a loss of personal encounters between school members which Fielding (2010) recognised as the means and ends of human aims for education. This research challenges the promotion of Shanghai's education practice (e.g., Tan, 2013) by revealing the consequences of inequality. The issue of the neo-liberal marketisation of schooling, which inevitably fails and marginalises some students (Slee, 2011), is not limited to China, but a widely shared challenge (Sharma et al., 2013). Gibson (2009) emphasised that empowering disabled children, might forcefully disrupt the trend of neoliberalism. We need to question what is wrong with regular education (Slee, 2011) and what children are included into.

Overall, this research argues that to enact the meaning of inclusion in practice, we must consider how to embed true partnerships with disabled children in daily practice. Listening to, and acting upon children's voices, can help surface the barriers to inclusion. Drawing on children's views, will enable practitioners to interrogate the decision-making process regarding 'what' education is provided, to 'whom' and 'how'. Realising inclusive education, requires us to undertake an alternative starting point of knowledge-making (Taylor, 2018) to reimagine the purpose of education, and together co-create a transformed future with students.

Conclusion

Nearly 30 years on since the initiation of mainstreaming disabled children, they still encounter barriers to access inclusive and quality provision. This paper argues for centring children's voices in the development of inclusive education as a way forward. I argue that a paradigm-shift is much needed in China to engage interdisciplinary perspectives of disability and childhoods. This research is not intended to claim a generalised representation. It should be noted that policies and practices vary across regions in China, and disabled children in rural and less affluent areas may face even more limited educational and life opportunities. To build upon this inquiry, I encourage fellow researchers to consider conducting larger-scale investigations of disabled children's experiences of schooling, and collaborative and action research with educational communities to explore effective approaches of centring disabled children in the process of developing inclusive practice.

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