

Basic special education in China: Status, challenges and strategies

(overview essay)

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Abstract: *Special education in China originated the in 19th century. The aim of the paper is mainly to introduce basic special education in contemporary China. At present, basic special education in China has made great progress in scale, integration and admission rate, etc.. However, there are some children with special needs not at elementary schools and fewer special schools with distributing imbalance, shortage of special teachers and poorer environment. Thus, it is very necessary to further improve “ecology”, promote “inclusion” and reform teacher education of elementary special education in future China.*

Keywords: *Special education, basic special education, China.*

1 Introduction

There are the following 33 provincial-level divisions, including 22 provinces, five autonomous regions, four municipalities, and two special administrative regions in China. The total area is 9.6 million square kilometers and the country's population is around 13.7 billion people.

Special education, in the modern sense, originated from Qiming-Gumu School for the blind children in Beijing in 1874, whose name is now Beijing Blind School; and Dengzhou Deaf School set up in 1887. Before 1949, the church was the main founder of special education in China (Guo, 2007), which involved in religious, vocational courses (Zheng, 2014). During 30-years reform and due to opening to the world from 1978, China has set up more and more complete special education system. The main purpose is to introduce the status, problems and strategies of contemporary basic special education in China.

2 Definition of special education in China

At present, the scholars considered that there are two different definitions of special education including broad and narrow senses (Li, 2015A). The former sense considers that special education should meet special needs of all individuals with or without disabilities; the latter one considers that it should mainly meet special needs of children with disabilities. In Chinese theory and practice, the scholars, mainly from the broad sense, consider that special education is supposed to meet special needs of individuals with or without disabilities.

1.1 Special education is to meet special needs for all individuals with or without disabilities in China

On the one hand, special education should meet special needs of individuals with disabilities including visual, hearing, speech and mental disabilities; especially, autism, deaf-blindness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairments, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, traumatic brain injuries and visual impairments, etc..

On the other hand, special education should meet special needs of individuals without disabilities, including giftedness education, special abilities education (such as music, art, movement, etc.), special periods education (such as different growing stages, natural and social environments), special fields education (such as safety, health, aids, sex education, etc.), special method education (such as punishment, isolation, etc.), special family education (such as divorced families, single-parent families, family with poor environment, etc.), special group education (such as migrant children, orphans, children with internet addiction, etc.) and individualized education (such as female children, children with bad morality, etc.) (Meng, 2006).

1.2 Special education system involves in both basic and higher education, and adult and vocational education in China (Zhao & Meng, 2008)

Basic special education is to meet special needs for individuals in basic education, including preschool special education (0–6 years old), elementary special education (6–12 years old), and junior and senior secondary special education (12–16/18 years old). Its main purpose is to make the educated learn some basic knowledge, skills and attitudes and lay foundation for further learning and life.

Higher special education is to meet special needs for individual in higher education, including higher professional education (3 years, no degree), undergraduate education (4–5 years, bachelor degree), graduate education for master degree (2–3; or 5–7 including united bachelor with master), and graduate education for doctoral degree (3–6; or 5–7 years united master and doctor; or 9–11 years united bachelor, master with doctor) at colleges and universities.

Vocational special education is to meet special needs for children and adults in vocational education, including elementary, secondary and higher vocational special education. Its main purpose is to introduce some basic knowledge and skills for vocation or employment.

Adult special education is to meet special needs of adults with or without disabilities. Its main purpose is to provide the adult with special needs with formal or informal education with or without diploma and degree.

In a word, special education in China is used for special needs of individuals with or without disabilities. It is divided into preschool, elementary, secondary, higher, vocational and adult special education, etc..

3 Status of basic special education in China

With further reform and opening to the world, China thinks more and more of special education and basic special education has made great progress in scale, integration and admission rate.

3.1 Increasing scale of basic special education schools in China

Investigation shows that there were more and more teachers and children with special needs and special education schools in China. For example, there were only 1531 special education schools with 386, 400 children with special needs and 38, 906 special education teachers in 2001, however, 2000 special education schools with 394, 900 children with special needs and 53, 360 special education teachers in 2014 (see Table 1)^[1].

Table 1: Status of basic special education in 2001–2014 China

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Number of special education schools	1531	1540	1551	1560	1593	1605	1618
Number of children with special needs	386,400	374,500	364,700	371,800	364,400	362,900	413,000
Number of special education teachers	38,906	40,378	40853	41384	42256	43572	44,862
Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Number of special education schools	1640	1672	1706	1767	1853	1933	2000
Number of children with special needs	417,440	428,125	425,613	398,736	378751	368103	394,900
Number of special education teachers	45,990	47,466	49,249	51,189	53,615	55,096	57,360

In addition, there are 2.2 billion students at elementary and secondary schools, among of which there are 1.6 ones at rural schools. According to 3 percent high IQ, there are 500 million children with giftedness at Chinese rural elementary and secondary schools (Guan, 2009).

3.2 Integrative basic special education in China

Integrative basic special education in China means that some of children with special needs attend special education schools and some attend general schools. Investigation shows that there are about 48,000 children aged between 0–6 who were diagnosed as disabled. There are 2000 special schools with 48,100 special education teachers and 394,900 individuals with special needs; and 209,100 children with special needs at general schools; and there are 187 special education classes at senior high schools with 7,227 students including 6,173 deaf and 1,054 blind children. In the meantime, there were 197 secondary vocational education schools for individuals with special needs (PWDs), with 11,671 current students, 7,240 graduates, and 5,532 with professional certificates in 2014 (CDPE, 2015).

3.3 Increasing enrollment rate of basic special education in China

There is 9-year compulsory education in China, which mainly involves in elementary special education and junior secondary special education. *Special Education Enhancement Program* (2014) tells us that by 2016, compulsory education enrollment rate

will have reached over 90% for children and adolescents with disabilities including visual, hearing, mental disabilities.

4 Challenges of basic special education in China

Although basic special education in China has made great progress in scale, integration and admission rate, it is still facing following challenges.

4.1 Less number and distribution imbalance of special education schools

On the whole, the number and quality of basic schools cannot still meet more and more special education needs in China.

On the one hand, there are still fewer basic special education schools in China, some of which are poor quality. Investigation shows that number of the students at pre-basic special education schools has become lower and lower during 2001–2014 in China (see Table 2)^[1]. Thoughts, content and methods are unsuitable to social development (Peng, 2010), and quality is very poor (Zhao & Meng, 2008) at some basic special education schools; early childhood education focuses on speech and hearing, elementary and secondary school curricula reflects low expectations for deaf students and lacks the same academic content provided for hearing students (Lytle, Johnson & Yang, 2005); gifted education is short of scientific purpose, curricula, modes and cannot meet educational needs for gifted children (Su, 2009).

Table 2: Ratio status of students in basic special schools in 2001–2014 China

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Number of special education schools	1531	1540	1551	1560	1593	1605	1618
Number of children with special needs	386,400	374,500	364,700	371,800	364,400	362,900	413,000
Ratio between students and schools	252.38	243.18	235.14	238.33	228.75	226.11	255.25
Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Number of special education schools	1640	1672	1706	1767	1853	1933	2000
Number of children with special needs	417,440	428,125	425,613	398,736	378751	368103	394,900
Ratio between students and schools	254.54	256.06	249.48	225.66	204.40	190.43	197.45

On the other hand, there are some imbalances in educational levels (preschool, elementary and secondary special education), types of special education needs and basic schools, regional distribution, general and special education. As regards education levels, elementary and junior secondary special education in China has developed very quickly, and preschool and secondary special education has developed very slowly (Lu, 2004; Zhang, 2014), quantity and quality of preschool special education cannot meet social needs (Liu & Zeng, 2007). As regards regional distribution, a gradually increasing difference is found between urban areas and rural areas, where a comparatively large number of disabled children fail to attend schools (Peng, 2013); there are more than 100 basic special schools in some provinces of east China, and fewer than 10 basic special schools in some provinces of west China (Peng, 2010). As for types of special needs and basic schools, the number of disabled students learning at ordinary schools is gradually decreasing in quantity (Peng, 2013); gifted education has mainly been distributed in urban region, and 55.1 percent of gifted children distributed in rural regions are looked down upon (Li & Mu, 2009).

4.2 Some children with special needs not in basic schools

Investigation shows that there are 84,000 disabled children and that the youth at school age did not have access to education, including 5,000 visual impairment, 5,000 hearing impairment, 5,000 speech impairment, 26,000 physical disabilities, 3,000 psychiatric diseases, and 12,000 multiple disabilities in 2013 (CDPF, 2014); 34.74% out of the 6–17 years old children with disabilities are dropped out of school, and among these dropouts, 59.70% have never been enrolled in schools, 26.23% quit schooling halfway, and 14.07% were deprived of education after graduation from primary or secondary schools (Hou, 2015).

4.3 Shortage in quantity and quality of special education teachers

On the one hand, there are fewer special education teachers in China. At present, there is still a high demand for special education teachers, who are increasing gradually but unsteadily in quantity (Peng, 2013). Investigation shows that although there are more and more teachers in each basic special education school with higher and higher student-teacher ratio (see Table 3)^[1], the number of them is lower than in other countries and cannot meet special education needs for the children (Lei, 2015). Furthermore, distribution of special education teachers is imbalance in gender (Wang, etc., 2011).

Table 3: Ratio status of basic special education teachers in 2001–2014 China

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Ratio between teachers and schools	25.4	26.22	26.34	26.53	26.53	27.18	27.73
Ratio between teachers and students	1 : 9.93	1 : 9.27	1 : 8.93	1 : 8.98	1 : 8.62	1 : 8.33	1 : 9.21
Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Ratio between teachers and schools	28.04	28.39	28.87	28.97	28.93	28.50	28.68
Ratio between teachers and students	1 : 9.08	1 : 9.02	1 : 8.64	1 : 7.89	1 : 7.06	1 : 6.68	1 : 6.88

On the other hand, there is low quality of special education teachers. Investigation shows that special education teachers have poorer educational background, and there are fewer ones with bachelor and graduate degree (see Table 4)^[1]. Especially, there are only 50 percent of teachers with special education diplomas or degrees (Zhang, 2014), and most of them are short of knowledge and abilities to provide special education (Lei, 2015; Wang, etc., 2011).

Table 4: Educational background of special education teachers in 2001–2014 China

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Total	38,906	40,378	40,853	41,384	42,256	43,572	44,862
Full-time	28494	29,805	30,349	31,058	31,937	33,396	34,990
Graduate	30	/	48	77	60	101	123
Undergraduate	2,232	/	3,757	5,061	6,621	8,425	10,630
Associate bachelor	12,280	/	15,023	16,240	17,041	17,679	18,010
Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Total	45,990	47,466	49,249	51,189	53,615	55,096	57,360
Full-time	36,306	37,945	39,650	41,311	43,697	45,653	48,125
Graduate	219	270	405	482	614	703	846
Undergraduate	12,872	15160	17,479	20,012	22,480	25,068	27,833
Associate bachelor	17,772	17,697	17,612	17,335	17,665	17,569	17,473

4.4 Poorer environment in basic schools

Poorer environment means less special educational investment and poorer infrastructure at Chinese basic schools.

On the one hand, investment in basic special education in China is not enough. Statistics shows that, despite more and more educational financial investment, quantity and ratio of special education investment was very low during 2001–2014 in China (see Table 5)^[1]. Furthermore, financial investment has great differences in different regions and fields (Peng, 2013); and there is usually less financial investment in non-compulsory education (including preschool and senior secondary special education), west, rural and poor-economic regions.

Table 5: Financial investment of special education in 2001–2014 China (billion yuan)

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Total education investment	4637.7	5480.0	6208.3	7242.6	8418.8	9815.3	12148.1
Investment in special education	13.0	14.9	16.4	17.1	23.5	24.6	26.2
Financial ratio of special education	0.0028	0.0027	0.0026	0.0024	0.0028	0.0025	0.0022
Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Total education investment	14500.7	16502.7	19561.9	23869.3	27696.0	30364.7	32806.5
Investment in special education	29.5	46.3	68.8	76.2	84.7	91.9	95.9
Financial ratio of special education	0.0020	0.0028	0.0035	0.0031	0.0031	0.0030	0.0029

On the other hand, there are poorer infrastructures in basic special education. Special education schools are significantly increasing in quantity, but their conditions are poor in townships (districts) (Peng, 2013); most of special education schools besides some in eastern China are short of teaching facilities and equipment (Zhang, 2014). In a word, quantity, quality and infrastructure of special education schools still cannot meet social and individual needs in China.

5 Strategies for basic special education in future China

Reflecting the achievements and problems of basic special education in China, we consider that it is very necessary to improve the ecology, and set up inclusive basic special education and lifelong teacher education for children with special needs.

5.1 Improving the ecology of basic special education

“Ecology” includes “soft” and “hard” environment of basic special education, especially including legal system, management mechanism, social support and identity, and infrastructure.

Firstly, It is necessary to set up more complete legal system and management mechanism of special education. Legal system and management mechanism are the “system assurance” of basic special education. Although China has published a lot of laws and policies of special education due to reform and opening to the world, the legal systems are still incomplete and short of operability (Li, 2012), and haven’t especially involved in evaluation standards on special education, special education schools and children with special needs (Kang & Lei, 2012). Thus, it is very imperative to improve the management system and mechanism and set up scientific evaluation standards of basic special education.

Secondly, Increasing the investment and improving the infrastructure of basic special education. Finance and infrastructure are the “material assurance” of basic special education. Although more and more finance investing in special education, it doesn’t meet the increasing and diversified needs of special education from society and individuals. The researcher consider that Chinese government should increase the financial investment and enhance the applied effectiveness in special education, and create learning environment without impairments (Wang, 2013). Thus, it is very necessary to increase the financial investment and improve the infrastructure of special education school, especially in western rural regions.

Thirdly, Increasing social support and identity of basic special education. Basic special education needs not only “system” and “material” assurance, but also “feeling” assurance. At present, China has not set up complete social support system for special education, basic special education is short of sufficient support from families, community and individuals, and basic special education, special education teachers and children with special needs have low social identity (Zhang, 2014). Thus, it is very important to set up “family-community-school-society” support network (Zhao & Wang, 2013) and “humanistic special education”, where everybody needs, concerns and shares basic special education (Zhang, 2008).

5.2 Setting up inclusive basic special education

“Inclusion” means that every child has a fundamental right to education (UNESCO, 1994, pp. ix). At present, China should set up inclusive basic education system for children with special needs.

Firstly, Setting up more and more high-quality basic schools for children with special needs. In almost every country, inclusive education has emerged as one of the most

dominant issues in the education of students with special education needs; the field of special education has moved from a segregation paradigm through integration to a point where inclusion is central to contemporary discourse (Mitchell, 2010, pp. 121). However, there are less quantity and lower quality of basic special education schools in China. Thus, from integration to inclusion, China should set up more high-quality basic schools to meet diverse needs of children with or without disabilities.

Secondly, promoting balanced development of basic special education. Balanced development involves in eastern and western, rural and urban, general and special education, disabled and gifted education, genders, and different special schools. At present, basic special education has great imbalance in educational levels and types, regional distribution. Thus, it is very necessary to think more of the disadvantages and decrease the time and space differences of basic special education to make it possible for all children with special needs to share more and more fair and high-quality basic education.

5.3 Strengthening teacher education for children with special needs

Teacher education is the key of training high-quality teachers for children with special needs and the “human assurance” of basic special education. In the future, China should further enlarge the scale and increase the effectiveness of teacher education for children with special needs.

Firstly, Enlarging the scale of teacher education for children with special needs. Investigation shows that there are at present 40 universities with special education degree programs, and enrollment of about 2000 bachelors, 120 masters and 10 doctors in China mainland and they are unbalanced in regional distribution (Li, 2015B); and special education teachers in rural basic schools have smaller chance of in-service training. It is very necessary to increase the admission enrollment of special education at Chinese universities and implement various in-service training for basic special education teachers.

Secondly, Increasing the effectiveness of teacher education for children with special needs. Basic special education needs not only the quantitative but also qualitative increase of the teachers. At present, there are simple focus fields, content, modes and short of network resources on special education degree programs in some universities; and pre-service and in-service training is short of pertinence and effectiveness. Thus, it is very necessary to enhance the flexibility, guidance and networking of teacher education for children with special needs in future China (Li, 2015B).

Thirdly, setting up lifelong teacher education for children with special needs. Lifelong education is a process of accomplishing personal, social and professional development throughout the life-span of individuals in order to enhance the quality of life for

both individuals and their collectives (Dave, 1976, pp.34). If the teachers work in the field of basic special education in their lifespan, they will need lifelong professional development and have to share lifelong teacher education integrated pre-service with in-service training. Thus, China should build a lifelong system of professional training for basic special education teachers (Bian, Teng & Zhang, 2012).

Conclusion

In short, basic special education in China has made great progress in scale and quality. However, it has still less quantity and low quality and cannot meet the diversely special needs of children with or without disabilities. Thus, it is very necessary to improve the ecology (such as legal systems management mechanism and social support and identity), transfer integration into inclusion and set up lifelong teacher education of basic special education.

Notes

- [1] Retrieved from http://www.moe.edu.cn/s78/A03/moe_560/s7567/index_3.html.

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