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# **The Role of Teacher Agency in Promoting Inclusion in a Chinese Primary School**

The physical and educational exclusion of children with special educational needs and disabilities from effective and relevant education is a persisting issue in Chinese schools. To move beyond ‘lazy inclusivism’ and support authentic change towards inclusive education, this paper explores the wisdom of Chinese educators and investigates how inclusion can be interpreted and practised through a qualitative study in an inclusive urban school in East Coast China. The headteacher and eight teachers were interviewed. The findings give voice to teachers and highlight the importance of understanding inclusion in its broad sense as respecting and valuing all members of the school community. Specific strategies were also shared by participants such as parental involvement, teacher training, themed campus décor, emphasis on rich extra-curriculum activities, and the innovation of ‘micro-semester’. Through analysing teachers’ reported ‘successful’ experiences in inclusion, the discussions explore how these teachers exercise agency to actively promote inclusion despite structural constraints. The paper analyses teachers’ interpretations and practical strategies in an inclusive school from the perspective of teacher agency and contributes to building up a strong base of empirical evidence that enriches the concept and facilitates the implementation of inclusive education in China.

Keywords: special educational needs, disabilities, lazy inclusivism, teacher agency, structural constraints, inclusion for all, community building, inclusive education

## **Introduction**

Inclusion has increasingly become a prominent theme within the educational policy and development in China in recent years (MoE, 2014, 2017; State Council, 2019). In particular, ‘inclusion’ is now among the eight key themes in the national educational development (State Council, 2019). Yet discourse, beliefs, and awareness of inclusion are not the same as the actual inclusive practices. The national inclusive strategy of ‘Learning in Regular Classroom’ (LRC) (MoE, 1994, 2014, 2017) has been frequently criticised as a merely tokenistic gesture

of ‘lazy inclusivism’ rather than introducing real changes towards authentic inclusive practices (Mu, 2021a, 2021b). Globally, UNESCO (2005, 9) similarly identifies that the “lack of organisational change has proved to be one of the major barriers to the implementation of inclusive education policies”. Organisational changes here refer to the reshaping of school structures such as curriculum and teaching strategies (ibid.). Bringing about these changes cannot be through targeting failing schools or underachieving groups (Dyson et al., 2010). Without changing the wider educational structures that are inherently unfair, any initiatives are just “compounded by the competitive, standards-driven nature of the system itself” (ibid., 27).

In the context of multiple structural constraints, it is particularly important to value the role of teacher agency in promoting inclusive practices inside classrooms. This paper takes the perspective of teacher agency to investigate, in a small urban primary school in East Coast China, how teachers understand and practise inclusion, and how they exercise their agency to do so while demonstrating resilience to ‘lazy inclusivism’ (Mu, 2021a, 2021b). This is of particular value considering the multiple structural barriers to the further progress of inclusive education in China. This study aims to give voice to teachers who have reportedly made progress towards greater inclusion and shared their relative ‘success’ and wisdom so as to inspire others, contributing to the ongoing efforts to building more inclusive schools in China.

## **Literature Review**

Inclusion/inclusive education does not have a single unitary definition (Slee, 2006; Norwich, 2008). In a broad sense, inclusion is about all learners. UNESCO (2005, 13) defines inclusion as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education”. In a narrow sense, inclusive education has its origins in special needs

education (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2010; UNESCO, 2014). It emphasises making mainstream education accessible for children with disabilities in a way that multi-dimensional aspects such as physical attendance, meaningful participation, learner diversity, educational equity are taken into account, so that all children may enjoy equal opportunities and resources to realise their full potential (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Hornby, 2015).

Inclusive education in China is officially described as “to integrate the education for disabled students into regular education to the largest extent” (State Council, 2017, Article 58). This reflects an understanding of inclusive education in its narrow sense, which only refers to children with disabilities while ignores the wider social diversity and differences in Chinese schools, such as children from ethnic minority backgrounds or rural-to-urban migrant worker families. In contrast, the Chinese academic circle offers a relatively more rounded understanding of inclusive education. For example, after a literature review, Sun and Wang (2014) suggest that inclusion can be understood by Chinese scholars and teachers as a continuous educational process where the society and schools accept all students, stand against discrimination and exclusion, encourage active participation and collaboration, meet different individual needs, and make sure children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) receive support and help in various aspects.<sup>1</sup> Taking it further, Sun and Sun (2016) describe the goal of inclusion as constructing a new social order that promotes diversity, breaks down segregation and marginalisation, and establishes mechanisms of open communication among stakeholders.

However, despite some supportive understanding of inclusion in principle, China’s inclusive education - currently encapsulated in LRC - faces multiple practical difficulties.

The LRC policy has frequently been criticised as merely concerning children’s physical

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of SEND does not exist in the Chinese official discourses. The term used in special education official documents is ‘disability’. However, in the academic field of special and inclusive education in China, the concept of ‘SEND’ is often used in line with the UNESCO’s (2017, 7) description to “refer to children with impairments that are seen as requiring additional support”.

integration into regular schools rather than educational and social participation (Peng, 2011; Qu, 2019; Xiao, 2005). Even so, the latest data indicate that merely 50.15% of students with disabilities in primary and junior high school stage attended regular schools through LRC (MoE, 2020). Attitude surveys also frequently find that teachers may hold negative views towards children with disabilities and the LRC provisions (Guan et al., 2017; Ma & Tan, 2010; Wei & Yuan, 2000). In addition, teachers are frequently found to have limited or no special and inclusive educational training (including pre-service and in-service), often accompanied by their schools' shortage for appropriate and specialised resources (Chen, 2014; Ma & Tan, 2010; Zhang, 2016).

The education of millions of children who have been excluded from effective mainstream provisions cannot wait until all the desirable conditions to ideally fall into place for educators to start working towards inclusion. Individuals are not just passively determined, constrained, or enabled by their circumstances, as they may respond differently according to their own reflexivity, concerns, and knowledge of such circumstances (Archer, 2003). In this regard, teacher agency helps to explain how practical initiatives and progressive understanding of inclusion from individual teachers are possible despite practical challenges.

In educational settings, teacher agency can be described as teachers' "active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions for the overall quality of education" (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015, 624). In recent years, an emergent body of research on teacher agency in the Chinese LRC context (Wang, Mu & Zhang, 2017) draws on Emirbayer and Mische (1998)'s seminal work that analyses agency from a three-dimensional perspective: the iterational (or routine, habits, patterns of actions), the projective (or purpose, motivation), and the practical-evaluative (or judgement, engagement with the situation). Each of the three dimensions of agency corresponds to a predominant temporal orientation, even

though each also “has itself a simultaneous internal orientation toward past, future, and present, for all forms of agency are temporally embedded in the flow of time” (ibid., 963).

To explain, the iterational dimension of agency is past-oriented. Through habits and repetition over time, individuals decide where to orient their efforts and sustain their identities and interactions, which are reflexive of their agency. Yet one does not always just repeat past routines, but also invents future possibilities. This corresponds to the projective dimension of agency, which is future-oriented. Inner drives such as “dreams, wishes, desires, anxieties, hopes, fears, and aspirations” urge agents to take actions and to change, reconstruct, innovate, and create so as to fulfil their “goals, plans, and objectives” (ibid., 984). Agents also make judgments and choices here-and-now in order to respond and react to the contingent and uncertain real-world circumstances that are usually laden with conflicts and contradictions. This can be described as the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, which is present-oriented. Increasing the capacity for practical, reflexive, and interpretive evaluation of agents’ social experiences help to strengthen their ability to exercise agency (ibid.)

It has not always been easy for teachers to practise their agency to promote inclusion. Education systems around the world often work to take agency away from teachers by prescribing fixed curricula and imposing standardised testing (Biesta, 2010). Neoliberal ideologies and practices that “encourage individualism, competition, examination-oriented education, and international comparisons of student performance” also frequently divert resources away from students with SEND and further marginalise them (Wang, Mu & Zhang, 2017, 120). In Chinese schools, the national teacher evaluation system that officially links teachers’ performance to their salary (MoE, 2008) has been frequently criticised as making teachers feel constantly under considerable pressure of workload and less confident or enthusiastic about their teaching due to the system’s heavy focus on the utilitarian purpose,

partial content, and rigid standards of education (Wang, 2010). Such contexts of competitive standardised testing and accountability can be particularly restraining for LRC teachers, who face the constant pressure of balancing student performance and educational equity.

However, a modicum of studies has also documented how Chinese LRC teachers exercise their agency to make progress towards greater inclusivity. For example, Wang, Mu, and Zhang (2017, 120) argue that LRC teachers may exercise their agency in the ‘practical-evaluative dimension’ “to identify, seek, secure, and create support within the resource-scarce LRC context and ultimately improve their professional skills” particularly when at the school level there is cultural, institutional, peer and physical environment support. Similarly, Mu, Hu, and Wang (2017, 132) found evidence of LRC teachers in both primary and junior high schools from seven provinces, who proactively practised their agency to seek additional support and resources despite policy and institutional difficulties so as to “construct healthy ecosystems that nurture the resilience of students with disabilities and promote the wellbeing of these students”. Mu and colleagues (2015) also found agentic LRC teachers in Beijing primary and junior high schools who were driven to seek external support to accommodate their students’ diverse and additional needs despite the scarce resources available in schools, suggesting that teacher agency can play a critical role as the fourth pillar of inclusive education teachers’ professional competence following attitudes, knowledge, and skills, which are widely recognised as core competencies for practising inclusion (Fisher et al., 2003; Liakopoulou, 2011).

The limited number of studies that report and analyse successful experiences from inclusive education teachers in Chinese schools indicates that agency can be a powerful tool that drives teachers to proactively seek and construct support to make progress towards greater inclusivity despite ambiguous policy discourses and scarce educational resources. This study adds to the empirical evidence that is much needed on the role of teacher agency

in promoting inclusive education by exploring how agentic teachers from an ‘atypically’ inclusive primary school in East Coast China perceive ‘inclusion’ and how inclusion has been practised in their school.

## **Methods**

This is a qualitative case study conducted in November 2016 using semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to explore what inclusive education may mean for Chinese primary schools. This paper reports on the findings based on the interview data in one of the four regular primary schools in a city in East Coast China, and explores in-depth teacher’s understanding and strategies regarding inclusive education.

The school discussed in the paper can be considered as an ‘atypical’ school in the sense that it is the only school in the research area that explicitly promotes ‘inclusive education’ as the school culture. The school has 18 classes, approximately 670 students and 50 staff members. The class size ranges from 35 to 45 students per class. The headteacher named five students with a medically diagnosed disability: two students on the Autistic Spectrum, two students with mild learning difficulties, and one student with cerebral palsy. An estimated number of 15 students, as reported by the headteacher, was identified by their class teachers only, as having special educational needs in terms of emotional and behavioural difficulties and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Students with SEND could receive additional support from their head class teachers.<sup>2</sup>

Nine teachers were interviewed (See Table 1 below for participant information). [A cross-section of participants taking into account of their roles and experiences was aimed for.](#)

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<sup>2</sup> In a Chinese school, the ‘head class teacher’ plays a leading role in the life and welfare of all class members for the duration of their time in school, and the role usually occupies the bulk of their weekly time as a teacher. These form the basis of the pastoral system within the school.



All participants were female, as the teaching staff at the school were predominantly female.

The interviews lasted 40-60 minutes each and were recorded with consent for later transcription. Main interview questions were on teachers' understanding of the concept of inclusion and their reflexive comments on their own teaching strategies accordingly. For example, have you heard of inclusive education? What's your understanding of the concept? Do you have students with SEND in your class, or have you ever taught students with SEND in your school? If yes, what is the experience like? Do you personally support the idea of inclusive education? Why?

Key statements made by the interviewees were translated into English and quoted as illustrative texts to assist the report of findings and analysis. The accuracy of my own translation was verified by back translating all the quotes through machine translation software to make sure the meaning did not change. This study was given ethical approval by the Institute of Education, University College London.

The data analysis used inductive thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017), which structured the analysis based on the recurring themes and deeper meaning that emerged from the data without imposed analytic preconceptions. The following first reports on teachers' interpretations of the inclusion concept and their reported inclusive strategies. Four key themes have been identified: inclusion as a unique school culture, as adaptive teaching, as recognising diverse talents, interests, and potentials, and as community building for all school members. The discussion section that follows will further analyse how these teachers exercised their agency in promoting inclusion despite structural constraints.

## **Findings - The Multi-Layered Meaning of Inclusive Education**

### ***Inclusion as a unique school culture***

The research school introduced and promoted 'inclusive education' as their school culture in

2011 with the appointment of the new headteacher Junyi. Junyi explained that the main reason was that about 62 per cent of the 670 students in the school were from rural-to-urban migrant worker families (see schooling of children from these families in Mu & Jia, 2016). This presented challenges arising from the higher degree of social diversity at the school, especially when compared to schools where the entire student body may be from local well-to-do families. ‘Inclusion’ was thus explicitly promoted in the school as a strategy to help overcome the issues of estrangement among children from distinctive social backgrounds, to strengthen the sense of belonging and solidarity within the school community, and to promote a social environment that is more conducive for learning. Junyi said:

“Inclusive education means to accommodate differences, promote equality, encourage diversity, and develop individuality. First of all, we need to acknowledge the differences among teachers as well as the backgrounds of our students; second, we aim to accommodate every child’s developmental needs; third, we appreciate and respect everyone’s achievements and development here.”

This highlights that inclusion is not only a concept related to children with SEND, but rather it means meaningful education, physical attendance, and accepting their differences to benefit all children (Sun & Wang, 2014; Sun & Sun, 2016; UNESCO, 2005, 2017). To contextualise this culture of ‘inclusion for all’, effort at the school was reported in the four following areas.

First, Junyi paid attention to the artistic design of the campus décor to convey the message of inclusion. On the walls there were art works, posters, and signs surrounding the theme of inclusion. For example, in the entrance hall of the office building, a quote hang on the wall in large font: “every child in front of you means the whole world for someone else”. Junyi explained that she chose this quote as a constant reminder for teachers to value every individual student with equal dignity regardless of their perceived ability, gender, or social background.

Second, the school offers a wide range of extra-curriculum activities with visiting professionals such as dancers, musicians, craftworkers, and stand-up comedians to lead the activity groups. Although extra-curriculum activities are a common practice in many Chinese primary schools, the research site school stands out in terms of the quality, quantity, and design of the activities. According to Junyi, these activities are intended to help to create more inclusive learning and socialising opportunities by offering platforms where different talents are valued and celebrated, and where children can enjoy diverse school activities independent of their academic performances or socio-economic backgrounds.

Third, strong parental involvement can be seen from the arrangement of a parents' committee. Two parents from the committee can voluntarily join the morning meeting every Monday with Junyi, the deputy headteacher, and six head class teachers to discuss schedules for the week, important notices, and feedback or suggestions. Such constant, engaged, and transparent involvement of parents means that at times school may draw on the resources from parents, especially in terms of staff and time, to increase inclusive capacity. Junyi mentioned that for children with autism, if their own parents cannot go with them on the school trip, an additional parents' committee member would usually volunteer to come along and watch over them. Such arrangements mean there can be more school trips without children being potentially marginalised.

Fourth, Junyi initiated an innovative learning programme called 'micro-semester'. It is a week-long unconventional learning programme every semester that resembles alternative education such as Waldorf, Montessori, and Round Square. During the 'micro-semester', instead of learning in fixed classrooms about separate academic subjects as in most Chinese schools, children learn according to themes by doing a variety of activities within and outside the school. For example, a theme for the 2015-2016 academic year for Grade One (six or seven-year-olds) was 'shopping in supermarket'. Children learned maths by calculating

budgets, Chinese by reading product labels, planning and communication skills by working in groups and deciding on a shopping list, and real-world experience of shopping semi-independently in a supermarket with the supervision of teachers and some parents. The class then had a picnic with what they bought. Against the traditional expectation of school education in China, during the ‘micro-semester’, children do not have to sit orderly in a well-disciplined classroom; there is no academic pressure or competition; and all can participate, collaborate, and contribute in their own ways. During the interviews, the ‘micro-semester’ was praised often by teachers, rather proudly, as an innovative and effective way to foster an inclusion culture within the school.

These specific innovations helped to foster an inclusive culture at the school. This was obvious on sports days: Junyi reportedly insisted that there was no stander-by audience, but instead every child can and should participate and be an athlete. There was a wider range of activities available not only in competing sports but also leisure games, so that everyone could be an active part of the event. All children’s equal participation in the school community is a key theme within inclusive education (UNESCO, 2005, 2017).

To summarise, the research school stands out as an example that despite the multiple difficulties and barriers within the wider Chinese education system, inclusion is not impractical or impossible. As Junyi said:

“We [teachers] cannot fundamentally change the grand structures of the current education system, but we can and should try our best to build transferable and sustainable education mini eco-systems in schools that help students to enter the future society with confidence and ease. So school leaders need to understand that exam scores are not the only criterion for education quality. It is the values and needs of children and parents that decide how schools should be.”

Inclusion is clearly promoted at the research school as an educational outlook where individual students’ needs for personal growth are at the centre. Such an outlook challenges

educators, school leaders, and policymakers to rethink if producing academically high achieving students for economic development and international competitions can be schools' sole purpose today. It also questions the traditional ways of learning such as fixed classrooms, delineated academic subjects, and routine timetables. To further explore the meaning of inclusion in this school, the other eight participating teachers were asked to share their beliefs and strategies.

### *Inclusion as adaptive teaching*

In order for school education to be effective and inclusive for children with SEND, curriculum and teaching need to be adaptive (Chan & Yuen, 2015; Westwood, 2013).

Fangfang and Wendai appeared to be consonant with this view. For example, Fangfang said:

“Inclusion means to fully accept everyone and to all-round accommodate all children. In practice, in plain words it means to make sure every child has learned what I've taught them. According to every child's differences in learning, I will give extra tutoring to those who learn slow and encourage those who learn fast to keep progressing.”

Fangfang saw the notion of learner diversity in terms of the pace of learning. Her adaptive strategy seemed focus on allocating different tutoring time and attention to students depending on their progress so that they may achieve similar learning outcomes.

Taking a slightly different perspective, Wendai said:

“Inclusion means ... teachers need to unconditionally accept all their students, include them, and teach them according to their own aptitudes. For example, I can ask the under-achieving students to answer the easy questions in class while let the academically strong ones to answer the tough questions. This way, all can gain confidence in answering questions correctly in front of others and be happy with learning... Using differentiated methods, I can keep everyone engaged and looked after, accept their differences, and help them progress.”

Wendai rather stressed the process of learning in terms of student participation, motivation, and engagement in class and adapted her teaching methods accordingly. This - valuing all students' presence, participation and achievement in the mainstream classroom - has also been increasingly recognised as a core aspect of inclusion (MacArthur, 2009; UNESCO, 2017).

### ***Inclusion as recognising diverse talents, interests, and potentials***

Chenyan and Tinghui seemed to agree that inclusion means to recognise and value the diversity of all students (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Hornby, 2015; UNESCO, 2005). For example, Chenyan said:

“I think inclusion means to fully accept all children and everything about them, to accept both their strengths and problems. ... and to provide the children with a conducive platform in school where they can further develop their own interests and hobbies.”

Despite the strong theme of exam-centred education in Chinese schools, Chenyan appeared to particularly value children's personal interests and hobbies outside academic studies. She considered an inclusive school as a nurturing environment where children are not only learning academically but also socially and culturally.

Tinghui similarly emphasised the importance of accepting differences and promoting diversity. She pointed out that the school should be a platform where students are encouraged to be themselves and excel in their own ways:

“Inclusion is to accept every child with open arms and allow the children to develop along their own paths according to their own abilities. Teachers need to provide the children with a platform where they can progress to reach their full potential.”

Clearly, both Chenyan and Tinghui saw inclusion as valuing children's individualised development in diverse areas. This perspective challenges the single focus on high academic

achievements which can be common in Chinese schools. Tinghui gave an example of Taotao, a boy diagnosed with autism in her previous class to which she was the head class teacher.

She described that:

“At the beginning in Grade One, I told my students that Taotao may be a bit more childlike but he is just an ordinary kid like anyone else. Because the children were quite young, they believed me without any questions. We had some excellent model students at that time who helped Taotao with personal things like using the toilet and getting lunch. ... I think by having Taotao in the class, the entire class was more united and supportive of each other.”

Tinghui did not label Taotao as having a recognised disability in front of her students. Her acceptance and kind explanation of Taotao’s differences rather inspired support and collaboration. As a result of this inclusive effort, Tinghui said that Taotao seemed to have spent enjoyable six years at the school, and that other children also benefitted by learning to become collaborative and compassionate individuals.

### ***Inclusion as community building for all school members***

Only one teacher, Linping, reported that inclusion is also about making the school an inclusive work environment for teachers:

“I think inclusion is not just about accepting the students as who they are. ... The school also needs to accept the teachers as who they are. All teachers have different personalities, ... different educational ideas and styles of teaching. So the school needs to accept every teacher as well as every student.”

This perspective does not see inclusion only as certain specific educational techniques of what or how to teach children. Inclusion is also about how members of the school community interact with each other in an equal and respectful way so that all can feel belong and valued for who they are. In this regard, Causton-Theoharis and Theoharis (2009) identify

that creating a climate of belonging among all stakeholders within the school is a continuing part of promoting inclusion. Armstrong (2008) similarly posits that inclusion means seeing every member within the school community as equals and creating a sense of belonging for all through being recognised, accepted, and valued for one's self.

In short, the research school appears to be 'atypically' inclusive where teachers have shown resilience to 'lazy inclusivism'. Such resilience is less about adaptation to, or coping with a problematic situation but more about an agentic enterprise that introduces structure-level change within the school community (Mu, 2021a, 2021c). It is important to understand how this has been achieved so as to offer insights into promoting inclusive education in Chinese schools in general. The next section further explores this from the perspective of teacher agency.

### **Discussions – Agency as Key to Move Beyond 'Lazy Inclusivism'**

Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 1012) contend that "the temporal nature of human experience" is the key to "understanding the variable orientations of agency toward its structural contexts". They have distinguished three dimensions of agency – iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative, corresponding to the past, the future, and the present. Findings in this study suggest clear evidence on how teachers practised agency to promote inclusion at the research school within the projective and the practical-evaluative dimensions of agency (ibid.). The iterative dimension appears peripheral in this particular case due to insufficient data.

First, regarding the projective dimension of agency, Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 1006) note that "while certain sets of actors might resist change and hold tightly to past routines ...[others] seek to imagine alternative futures for a problematic present". The findings show that, instead of only focusing on helping students succeed academically for preparation to compete in the future labour market, teachers at the research school also



strongly support a moral view of education where teachers are motivated to educate all children to become citizens with equal standing living fulfilling lives. This has been clearly demonstrated in the examples presented in the findings section, such as Junyi's 'micro-semester' initiative, Chenyan's belief in recognising students' diverse talents, interests and potentials, as well as Tinghui's strategical reshaping of her whole class into an empowering social space for Taotao and every member of the class. This is fundamentally inseparable from what teachers value and care about most. Inclusive education challenges the policy that promotes a fast-growing economy even at the cost of an increasingly divided society and disfranchised groups. Teachers at the research school appeared to share the inclusive values and beliefs that the civic and public purposes of the school to preserve and promote healthy citizenship for a moral society in the long run are as important as the economic and vocational purposes in the short term. Thus, driven by such "an imaginative engagement of the future" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, 984), teachers at the research school exercised their agency in the projective dimension to make their classrooms more inclusive.

Second, regarding the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, Biest and Tedder (2007, 137) argue that agents "always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations". Because 'inclusion' was purposefully promoted as the dominant school culture at the research school, teachers' inclusive effort was more likely to be supported, recognised and encouraged. Such an 'inclusive culture' can be seen as permeating the 'discursive, material, and relational aspects' within the practical-evaluative dimension of agency identified by Priestley and colleagues (2013).

To explain, first, discursive aspects are value-laden and reflected through agents' inner and outer dialogues (ibid.). The participating teachers at the research school all reported some successful experience working with children with SEND. The way 'inclusion' was talked about within the school as a positive and practical goal also helped to give meaning and fulfilment to teachers to further believe in and practise inclusion. Second, material aspects include resources and the physical environment (ibid.). Further improvement is particularly needed in these aspects for the research school to continue empowering their teachers' agency work. Apart from in-service training opportunities on inclusive education, the research school only had scarce resources that teachers could use to support their inclusive effort. Despite the artistic design of the campus highlighting the theme of 'inclusion', the classrooms were crowded with around 40 students per class and accessible facilities were lacking. Third, relational aspects concern with social structures such as roles and trust (ibid.). The parents' committee, the 'no stander-by' sports day, and the strategy of adaptive teaching shared by teachers such as Fangfang and Wendai at the research school are all built upon a trusting relationship of equal-participation among all school members. This inclusive culture shifts away from separating teachers and students by traditional power differential. As equal valued members of the school community, children are not seen as failing the school when they struggle. This understanding can drive agentic teachers to adapt and change their teaching methods to better accommodate diverse learner needs.

As Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 1010) note, "by subjecting their own agentic orientations to imaginative recomposition and critical judgment, actors can loosen themselves from past patterns of interaction and reframe their relationships to existing constraints". On the one hand, teachers at the research school broke away from the traditional non-inclusive patterns of teaching and started to move beyond 'lazy inclusivism' (iterational) by developing a forward-looking moral view of education that values more the civic purpose of education

(projective). On the other hand, a purposefully promoted inclusive school culture enabled these teachers to make critical judgements, where they saw students' educational 'underachievement' not solely as the result of students' individual characteristics, but rather as the institutional failure of schools to adapt and meet diverse learner needs (practical-evaluative).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed how a group of teachers from a small urban primary school in East China view and promote inclusion as a unique school culture, as adaptive teaching, as recognising diverse talents, interests, and potentials, and as community building for all school members. By sharing the relatively successful experiences from the research school, and by analysing how these teachers managed to exercise their agency to promote inclusion, this study may offer hope and aspirations to more teachers and schools who strive to become more inclusive but face practical and structural challenges. This paper has shown that to break away from the old patterns of non-inclusive teaching and become more resilient to 'lazy inclusivism' (iterational), one way may be focusing on developing and applying a forward-looking, moral view of education (projective) and fostering a wider inclusive culture in schools with strong leadership (practical-evaluative).

The research school demonstrates that despite multiple structural constraints, inclusion is indeed possible. Although structures can often have causal powers, individuals are not only passively determined, constrained, or enabled by social structures. Even under the same structural constraint, individuals may respond differently according to their own reflexivity, concerns, and knowledge of their circumstances (Archer, 2003). This has been demonstrated in this paper in terms of how teachers at the research site school have exercised

their agency to promote inclusion in the projective and practical-evaluative dimensions of agency.

Admittedly, there is still much room for further improvement in this atypically inclusive school. For example, the physical space in classrooms was still traditionally arranged in rows and columns of tables and chairs in a sit-and-listen style, and the school buildings still did not have accessible facilities such as lifts, ramps, or accessible toilets installed. Systems that aimed to scaffold on teachers' willingness to further engage in inclusive initiatives, such as a teacher evaluation system, professional supportive schemes, and financial allowance may help to sustain or progress the relative "success" at this atypically inclusive school. Developing outreach programmes that enable teachers to gain formal qualifications in inclusive education can also help to expand the culture of effective teaching and learning for all children. Further studies are thus encouraged to explore strategies in these areas.

This study is limited by its small sample. The inclusive efforts at the research school may be anecdotal and cannot be generalised or easily replicated. However, it is not the aim of this study to generalise or to offer quick remedies, but rather to add to the inclusion debates by analysing how agency plays a vital role in enabling an inclusive understanding and practical strategies among teachers. The process to greater inclusion is "a time-consuming, demanding and disturbing task and there are no easy short-cut recipes" (Barton, 2005, 319). Teachers, who are at the frontline of making inclusion work, have valuable perspectives and need to be empowered to exercise their agency more towards improving education for all. More research is needed to explore and share effective strategies and innovations in local schools towards greater inclusion.

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