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# **Structural Barriers to Inclusive Education for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in China**

## **Abstract**

Inclusion has been increasingly recognised as a global common goal in education. In China, inclusive education for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is currently practised as ‘Learning in Regular Classrooms’ (LRC). However, not only the inclusion policy has frequently been criticised as failing to provide clear, systematic, or consistent strategies, often, the actual practices of LRC have also been found merely concerning children’s physical integration into the mainstream settings. This discussion paper explores key structural barriers to inclusive education through reviewing policies within the wider education eco-system that are relevant to the theme of inclusion but outside the LRC policy itself. The analysis illustrates how the complex and interlocked structural barriers embedded within the wider context of current education policies pose persisting constraints for inclusion to progress in China, and how these structural barriers unique to the Chinese education system also reflect the common “wicked problems” for practising inclusive education globally. The paper discusses five main education structures: neo-liberal education policies, national college entrance examination system, teacher evaluation system, staffing quota system, and the ‘combine medicine and education’ policy. The conclusion illustrates the complexity and main issues facing future inclusion policy reforms and highlights main objectives for policy change. It points to that for inclusion reforms to be effective, broader changes are needed within the wider education eco-system.

**Keywords:** Chinese education system, inclusion, LRC, policy analysis, wicked problems

## Introduction

Inclusion has been increasingly recognised as a global common goal in education (UN, 2015; UNESCO, 1994, 2015). It is not only about providing relevant, effective, and high-quality education for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). It also concerns with improving the quality of education for all children (Armstrong *et al.*, 2000, Qu, 2019). However, around the globe, scholars (Winter & O’Rawl, 2010; Winzer & Mazurek, 2009) have pointed out the gaps within translating the philosophical acceptance of the inclusive theories and principles into effective teaching practices. Wicked problems for practising inclusion persist in aspects such as policy, education system, pedagogy, and attitudes. Wicked problems refer to complex and interdisciplinary socio/economic problems that involve multiple stakeholders’ perceptions (Price, 2016). In the field of inclusive education for children with SEND, for example, Armstrong (2017, 230) identifies four categories of wicked problems:

“[1] The adverse flow-on effects of neo-liberal educational policies on children or young people with disabilities; [2] Achieving a curriculum which is fit for purpose in meeting the holistic needs of learners with disability; [3] Responding in an effective way to behaviours by students with a disability which warrant adult concern or action and in a manner which avoids educational exclusion; [and 4] Ensuring that special and inclusive education is a progressive space which adopts ethical and effective pedagogy.”

To explain, first, neo-liberal education policies dictate that schools are increasingly about achieving excellence, aiming for high examination passes, securing top places in top universities, and pushing the brightest children to excel. An obsession with international educational ranking such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has exerted immense pressure on schools to increasingly narrowly focus on limited aspects of education, such as on academic achievements in certain subjects (Scott, 2017). This makes

children with SEND particularly vulnerable to be further stigmatised, marginalised, and disadvantaged, as they tend to be viewed as less promising and competitive in their academic performance and/or economic contribution. Research (Lloyd, 2008; Slee, 2011) suggest that neo-liberal educational policies can be an important reason for the increased exclusion of pupils from mainstream schools into special schools, as these policies emphasise academic outcomes and international school ranking. Norwich (2014) and Slee (2013) also connect the exclusion of children with SEND to their perceived negative impact on school performance records. The neo-liberal orthodox in education poses a powerful structural barrier to inclusion.

Second, inclusion necessarily requires a meaningful curriculum broader than what is typically available. Traditionally, curricula around the world have been designed for the majority of the typically developing children, focusing primarily on teaching academic skills and implicitly cultivating other soft skills. Yet for children with SEND, the hidden curriculum of soft skills, such as interpersonal, study, organisational, test-taking and living skills, may need to be taught explicitly alongside the academic subjects. Thus, an inclusive curriculum for children with SEND, as Alexander (2012, 2) warns, should avoid narrowly “mimicking the curricula of PISA high performers” and be accompanied by assessments that are conducive to learning. Yet fundamental curriculum reforms face multiple challenges. For example, how to make the curriculum with significant modification implementable and not add substantial additional workload for teachers (Garner & Forbes, 2015), and how the curriculum can be effectively managed by addressing the tension of the dilemmas of difference (Norwich, 2008). Without clear answers to these problems, a curriculum can hardly be truly inclusive.

Third, teachers effectively responding to classroom disruptive behaviours in inclusive and non-stigmatising ways is necessary for inclusion to work. Yet in practice, teachers can

often be uninformed in their views about child behaviour (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2014). MacLeod (2006, 155) notes that some teachers may hold negative perceptions about children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and see them as “bad, mad, and sad”. Mand’s (2007) research in Germany also reports that children with behavioural problems can be disliked in both special school and mainstream primary schools. Teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion are highly relevant to the implementation of inclusive practices (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011). Negative views on SEND are likely to lead to inappropriate use of sanctions for uncompliant behaviours from pupils with SEND, which may further marginalise and stigmatise them in class. This may also raise concerns regarding bullying (Carter & Spencer, 2006; Huefner, 2015; Norwich & Kelly, 2004). Thus, a key task of inclusion is for teachers to develop the necessary understanding and positive attitudes when responding to challenging behaviours from children with SEND.

Fourth, challenges arise from developing effective inclusive pedagogy. Scott (2016, 158) notes that pedagogic approaches are “derived from the curriculum standard and not from any summative assessment or evaluation standard or approach”. Without an inclusive curriculum guided by inclusive educational objectives, it is difficult to construct an inclusive pedagogy. Inclusive pedagogy also needs to grapple with the ‘wash-back effects’ of the assessment process such as the growing emphasis on examination under neo-liberalism: teaching to the test induces the curriculum to narrow down to become more easily assessed, which in return informs more narrowly delineated pedagogic standard (ibid.). In addition, there is the concern that general education classroom teachers are often not adequately trained to individualise learning for children with SEND or to manage such heterogeneity within classrooms (Costello & Boyle, 2013; Kauffman, 2015; Webster & Blatchford, 2015). This can be associated with mainstream schools not being sufficiently funded or equipped

with the appropriate specialised resources for special education (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011; O’Keefe, 2004).

In short, “wicked problems” surround the translation of the inclusion principles into effective practices on a global scale. To provide answers to these difficult questions, continuous debates and research are needed to offer a deeper understanding that is well-grounded in specific local contexts. This paper takes the Chinese perspective and explores key structural barriers to inclusion and how they may serve to preserve and perpetuate the above “wicked problems”. These structural barriers are identified through reviewing national policies and regulations relevant to special education and inclusive education from the Ministry of Education (MoE), State Council, and National People’s Congress (NPC).

The following analysis first offers an overview of the educational policies of education for children with SEND in China to set the scene. Then five main education sub-structures are discussed as barriers to inclusion: neo-liberal education policies that promote intense competition and narrowly-defined cost-benefit calculation in resource allocation; national college entrance examination system (*Gaokao*) that encourages exam-centred education; teacher evaluation system that overly emphasises often-rigid quantitative measuring; staffing quota system (*bianzhi*) which can be linked to large class sizes and heavy teacher workload; and the ‘combine medicine and education’ (*yi jiao jiehe*) policy that perpetuates a medical model of disability. The analysis shows how the complex and interlocked structural barriers embedded within the current education policies pose persisting constraints for inclusion to progress, and how these structural barriers reflect the common “wicked problems” for practising inclusive education globally. The conclusion illustrates main issues and the complexity facing future inclusion policy reforms, and highlights main objectives for policy change.

## **Education Policies for Children with SEND in China**

The education for children with SEND in China has two dominant placement models: LRC (Learning in Regular Classroom, *sui ban jiu du*) and special schools. LRC is known as the Chinese local practices of inclusive education, as it encourages mainstream schools to admit children with disabilities and accordingly make arrangement to accommodate their needs (MoE, 1994, 2014, 2017). The latest data show that 50.15% of students with disabilities in primary and junior high school stage in China attended regular schools through LRC (MoE, 2020).

The concepts of inclusion and LRC bear certain resemblance. First, LRC has a similar rationale as inclusive education. In the three key policy papers regarding LRC (MoE, 1994, 2014, 2017), the first and foremost motive and purpose of developing LRC is stated as to implement compulsory education for children with SEND. Since the idea of compulsory education is primarily based on children's rights, it can be argued that LRC is principally designed to safeguard the right to education for children with SEND. This draws similarity between LRC and inclusion, as both concepts are fundamentally rights-based.

Second LRC is officially advocated as having the benefit of advancing the quality of mainstream provisions by providing the opportunities for all to study together, where the mainstream pupils and their peers with SEND can communicate, better understand, and help each other (MoE, 1994). These are also social benefits of inclusion acknowledged by scholars globally (Alderson and Goodey, 2018; Banda, Hart and Liu-Gitz, 2010; Pearson, 2016; Shaw, 2017).

Third, LRC is justified by the state in that it promotes educational equality, upholds humanitarian spirits, helps people with disabilities to better develop and integrate into the wider society to improve their livelihood and wellbeing, and contributes to achieving the ultimate goal of constructing a socialist harmonious society (MoE, 2014, 2017). A country's

level of development can be indicated by how disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups are treated. Better special educational provisions, including LRC, have been promoted on the ground of equality and social justice for people with disabilities. The general ideas behind LRC thus bear resemblance to inclusive values.

However, despite the similarities, the actual practices of LRC have often been criticised as merely concerning children's physical integration into the mainstream settings (Liu & Zhang, 2017; Peng, 2011; Song & Liu, 2012; Xiao, 2005; Xu & Zhao, 2017). Research also frequently found teachers who preferred special schools for children with SEND as they believed these provisions were more beneficial in terms of catering for children's additional learning needs (Guan, Yan & Deng, 2017; Zhang, 2016). Such views may be seen as having their roots in the way special schools have been portrayed in the national policies.

From the early 1990s to 2017, the guiding framework for developing education for children with SEND had been that: 'LRC and special units attached to regular schools are the main body and special schools are the backbone' (State Council, 1991). Inclusion was not prioritised and special schools were equally encouraged. Scholars (Chen, 2014; Piao, 2009) voiced support for such a framework as a way to quickly raise the school enrolment rate among children with disabilities through the expanding scale of special schools, which was seen as part of the process towards universal primary education. This narrow focus on institutionalising children with disabilities without considering the quality of provisions or the social implications may seem perfunctory and deceiving.

The latest special education policy in 2017 updated the guiding framework: 'LRC is the main body; special schools are the backbone; home education<sup>1</sup> and distant learning are complementary parts; and inclusive education is to be promoted all-around' (MoE, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> For children with SEND who are unable to travel outside their homes with ease, specialist teachers regularly visit the students' homes and give lessons.



Although the new framework enunciates inclusion as a clear goal, special schools are still highly promoted as the ‘backbone’ of special education in China. The fundamental contradictions in the Chinese education policies for children with SEND – promoting inclusion (e.g., in the form of LRC) and exclusion (segregated special schools) at the same time -, have left much flexibility in interpreting the policy language as for what provisions can be regarded as inclusive. Such contradictions can be seen as partly embedded within how policies have been updated: the changes have mainly been about adding broad ‘inclusive agenda’ without challenging the old language or ways of thinking.

Scholars have extensively discussed the special education policy itself and illustrated how it has failed to provide clear, systematic, or consistent strategies (Chen *et al.* 2006; Deng & Lu 2012; Deng & Jing 2013; Deng & Manset 2000). However, as inclusive education for children with SEND is a sub-system of the whole education eco-system, inclusion reforms are likely to be ineffective if they were not situated within the wider education policy contexts with consideration of possible competing priorities and constraints arising from other sub-structures.

Therefore, this discussion paper explores key structural barriers to inclusion through reviewing policies within the wider education eco-system that are relevant to the theme of special education and inclusive education in addition to the LRC policy itself. Five education sub-structures have been identified: neo-liberal education policies, national college entrance examination system (*Gaokao*), teacher evaluation system, staffing quota system (*bianzhi*), and the ‘Combine medicine and education’ (*yi jiao jiehe*) policy. The following begins with the first structural barrier – neo-liberal education policies.

### **Neo-Liberalism: Competition and Cost-Benefit Measurement**

Neo-liberalism can be defined as:

"A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free market, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices".

(Harvey, 2005, 2)

Clearly, neo-liberalism is associated more with capitalism and less with the socialism and communism that characterise China. But Chinese education is powerfully influenced by global neo-liberal values (Ball, 2012; Zhang & Bray, 2017). Neo-liberalism, as Harvey (2005, 3) highlights, has become globally accepted “to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world”. In an education setting, this means that educational investment may be regarded by the state as a way to gain competitiveness in international economy; individual success or failure is also often interpreted in terms of personal-blame – not working hard enough or not smart enough – rather than public issues such as social structural barriers (*ibid.*). The following two subsections detail the neo-liberal themes of competition and cost-benefits calculation in Chinese education and how they present barriers to inclusion.

### ***Competition***

Neo-liberalism emphasises an ethic of competitive individualism (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Competition can drive and pressure schools to focus on producing high achieving students measuring up to continuously rising standards in order for schools to secure top positions at league tables; and children with SEND may be seen as ‘threats’ to their typically developing peers in the sense that they may drag others down academically or behaviourally (Alderson, 2018; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Scott *et al.*, 2016).

The emphasis on competition in neo-liberalism also adds financial pressures on schools to educate an efficient workforce for companies, institutions, and the state to gain competitive advantages in the global free market. This is reflected in the state strategy of *rencai qiang guo* (human talents strengthen the country) (State Council, 2002). *Rencai* is a unique term in the Chinese language. The transliteration is ‘human, talent’, but the term is used to refer to the broad concept of ‘human resources/capitals’, particularly those with desirable aptitudes or capabilities, without distinguishing innate or acquired skills or talents. According to the State Council (2010, preface):

“*rencai* refers to those who have certain expertise or specialised skills, conduct creative work and make contributions to society. They are labourers with high ability and quality. They are the primary resource for the economic and social development of our country”.

The state promotes *rencai* as “a strategic resource” in today’s global competition, and education has a “prominent, fundamental, leading, and overall role” in producing *rencai* (State Council, 2002). The state economic strategy is clearly able to direct priorities in education policies. For education, this means that the first task is to produce a number of high-level, highly skilled experts to lead innovations (Li, 2018).

This neo-liberal emphasis in education policies attracts attention and directs discourse onto the education of the elites, who have been repetitively portrayed as valuable resources for the state’s international competitiveness and for the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (Xi, 2014). Such an emphasis can work effectively to drive schools, teachers, parents, and students into a fierce competition for becoming such desirable *rencai*, who are often rewarded by additional educational resources, prestige, and career prospect. Indeed, high standards and aspiration for *rencai* are inarguably necessary and welcome in order to pioneer

innovation and lead development, but they are not excuses that education for the rest does not matter. The overwhelming, narrow focus on producing elites raises concerns for social justice and equality in education. The phrase ‘education equality’ did not appear in the first national policy regarding *rencai* (State Council, 2002), and it only appeared once, rather perfunctorily, without further explanation in the latest *rencai* policy (State Council, 2010).

In such a context, schools are likely to be pressurised into competing to raise student attainment and to ‘sell themselves’ with desirable brand images based on consumer wants. In this case, parents want their children to become *rencai*, and the Local Education Authorities (LEAs) want schools to produce *rencai*, while vulnerable children such as children with disabilities are likely not to be regarded as potential candidates.

However, around the world, people with disabilities have challenged the medical deficit model with their great accomplishments. In the UK, Professor Stephen Hawking is widely regarded as one of the world’s most brilliant minds for his contribution to science despite motor neurone disease. In Sweden, Greta Thunberg, who described herself as having Asperger Syndrome, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and selective mutism, was recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to stop global warming and climate change (Leung, 2019; Thunberg, 2018). In China, Zhou Zhou, identified with Down Syndrome, was known as a music conductor performer (Wei, 2018), and Bi Changyu, who has ASD, was praised as the ‘Chinese Picasso’ for his artworks (Yu, 2017).

These examples and many more are reminders that people with disabilities have diverse and valuable talents, and that they can also be *rencai* who contribute to social and economic development. Inclusion in this regard rejects the neo-liberal trend of narrow competitions in certain areas of education. It rather highlights the need to redefine and broaden the scope of the desirable skills, knowledge, and qualities in education, so that

schools do not marginalise or reject children with SEND for fear of becoming less competitive and less desirable in the consumer market, and more people with disabilities like Zhou Zhou and Bi Changyu can become the equally contributing citizens they can be.

### ***Cost-Benefit Calculation***

The cost-benefit calculation in Chinese education is clearly embedded within the main purpose of education advocated by the state. According to the *Education Law* (NPC, 1995/2015): “education must serve the advancement of socialist modernisation and the people, and be combined with productive labour and real-life practices” (Chapter 1, Article 5). This position has recently been reaffirmed by the National Institute of Education Science (2018, 3), which defines that “the main core output of future schools [is] to serve the social economy”. Similarly, President Xi reiterated the primary direction of educational development in his latest speech: “to serve the people, to serve the CCP’s governing, to serve socialism with Chinese characteristics, and to serve the advancement of socialist modernisation” (MoE, 2018). Central to these statements of the purpose of education are political ideology and economic development. Thus, apart from producing compliant citizens who endorse the ruling Party’s political legitimacy, formal education is also the state’s financial investment in individuals with an expected future return. This means students who are likely to have the most successful and profitable careers tend to be allocated more and better resources and attention.

An example of the cost-benefit calculations in the formal education system in China is key schools. Key schools were designated selective state-run schools that enjoy better resources and receive additional funding from municipal, provincial, or national education authorities. The context for creating key schools was the limited resources in a relatively

weak economy and the demand for quickly producing a productive labour force for social and economic development in the 1950s following the establishment of the new regime of PRC in 1949 (Tan & Wang, 2016). In the 1970s, Deng Xiaoping (quote in Bian, Wang & Ni, 2002, 137) asserted that “in order to produce *rencai* (high-quality labour force) early and quickly, teaching resources, education funding, and materials all should be used in key aspects that bring improvements”. This emphasis clearly promotes cost-benefit calculation in education. Resources were not allocated based on needs as a public good, but rather were invested on predicted potential returns informed by perceived intelligence or cognitive ability measured by exams. The housing market subsequently responded with more expensive neighbourhood near key schools, and those with more resources found ways to send their children to these ‘better’ schools (Tan & Wang, 2016). Acknowledging its serious implications for social inequality, in the 1990s, policies started to shift and discourage key schools (MoE, 1993, 1997), until more recently key schools in compulsory education were clearly denounced (MoE, 2010; NPC, 2006, Article 22).

However, gaps often exist between policies and practices. Although the concept of key schools was officially removed from the mainstream education discourse, its practice and influence still linger (Epstein, 2017; You, 2007). Concentrating limited resources to produce elites inevitably further disadvantages children with SEND and many others. It raises the question of whether and how it can be justified to have an education system designed to benefit some at the expense of others. Deeply, this emphasis on cost-benefit calculation in resource allocation is embedded within the neo-liberal education policy, where the fundamental purpose of education by law was described as producing an efficient labour force, early and quickly, for economic development, resources can be prioritised accordingly (MoE, 2018; NPC, 1995/2015).

In short, this section has explored how Chinese inclusive education faces resistance from the strong neo-liberal themes of competition and cost-benefit calculation in the education system. This resonances with the global debates over neo-liberal education policies being a “wicked problem” for practising inclusion (Armstrong, 2017). Admittedly, being a ‘socialist country with Chinese characteristics’ led by the Communist Party, China is not often associated with neo-liberalism. The strong presence of the Chinese government as well as the traditional Confucian cultural legacy create the over-arching discourses that collective norms outweigh self interests, and the state’s central control triumphs individual freedom. Thus, although the intense educational competition and the emphasis on cost-benefit calculation in allocating educational resources are elements that resonate with the global debates on neo-liberal education policies, they are contextualised in the unique circumstances in China and hence their implications for change are necessarily different from those in a Western democratic context. This nuanced understanding helps to shed further light on addressing the global “wicked problems” for practising inclusion in different local contexts.

To further understand these “wicked problems”, the institutional frameworks that are created and preserved by neo-liberal education policies need to be unpacked. The following section explores *Gaokao*, the national college entrance examination system in China.

### ***Gaokao*: Exam-Centred Education**

*Gaokao* (1952 - present) is a high-stake, centralised, standardised national testing system for selecting candidates for regular higher education, usually once a year in June. Its significance has always been highly regarded in the Chinese society. This can be reflected in the common saying: *Gaokao* is the baton that directs education. Under the pressure of high-stake testing, schools tend to overwhelmingly focus on narrowly training students to succeed in exams.

This is because not only the students' own futures rely heavily on their grades, the reputations of schools and teachers also ultimately hinge on their students' success in the exam (Dai, Chen & Davey, 2007; Davey & Higgins, 2005). *Gaokao* can be seen as another example of promoting competitive individualism in education that shares the similar logic with neo-liberalism, posing as a “wicked problem” for practising inclusion in the Chinese education system.

The education system that mostly trains children to pass competitive exams saw the creation of a new expression in modern Chinese: *gaofen dineng* (high scores, low capability). It describes students who are good at taking exams but poorly skilled in the workplace. The MoE has clearly recognised and attempted to address this. The latest standard of the national curriculum for compulsory education specifies that 49 to 58 per cent of the teaching schedule should be devoted to academic subjects (including history, geography, physics, biology, chemistry, Chinese, maths, and English) (MoE, 2001b). The standard states that an aim is to minimise the over-emphasis on academic subjects and to promote students' all-round development (*ibid.*).

However, simply encouraging non-academic subjects in compulsory education by specifying teaching schedule proportions is not enough to counter the trend of an exam-centred education. As long as the predominant academic focus within *Gaokao* does not change, pressure for achieving high academic attainments persists. Such an education environment is clearly a mismatch with the needs of some children with SEND, especially those with severe needs, as the main benefits of them attending mainstream schools may not necessarily be to compete academically with their typically developing peers. On the contrary, these children may benefit more from the 42-51 per cent of the non-academic subjects (MoE, 2001b) and the social environment where they can learn and live alongside



their neighbourhood friends, and vice versa. These ideas have also been acknowledged in policy reforms, such as in the discourse shift from *yingshi jiaoyu* (teaching to the test) to *suzhi jiaoyu* (liberal/quality/character education) (State Council, 1999; 2001; Xi, 2017).

It is worth noting that children with a recognised disability were not eligible to participate in *Gaokao* until 2015 (MoE, 2015a). This again highlights that historically, standardised tests were not designed for considering students with disabilities (Lai & Berkeley, 2012; Thurlow *et al.*, 2005).

Therefore, for inclusion to work, *Gaokao* needs to change. Such changes are not only needed in order for education to shift from being exam-focused to student-centred, but *Gaokao* may also constrain the development of inclusive curriculum reform, which forms another “wicked problem” for practising inclusive education. Despite effort in the recommended proportion for non-academic subjects (MoE, 2001b) as well as the call for *suzhi jiaoyu* (liberal/quality/character education) (State Council, 1999; 2001; Xi, 2017), recent curriculum reforms have not seemed to fundamentally shift the exam-focus in education driven by *Gaokao*. Curriculum development first and foremost requires the educational aims and objectives to be set out to inform the kind of “knowledge, skills and dispositions” that an education system is designed to promote (Scott, 2016, 157). If *Gaokao* remains its transfixion on testing and promoting students’ competitive performance in cognitive and academic abilities as main educational aims, then curriculum reforms hardly have much room to become truly inclusive in practice, and an exam-centered education will continue to disadvantage children with SEND who are less able to compete academically.

### **Teacher Evaluation System: Over-emphasis on Quantitative Measuring**

In the context of neo-liberal education policies, there seems to be a growing accountability trend globally within the education system, where teacher quality has been defined, monitored, measured, and evaluated in terms of competitive performance schemes (Barzano & Grimaldi 2016; OECD, 2009). In China, as an incentive to encourage teachers to raise teaching standards, ensure accountability, and improve educational quality, MoE (2008) introduced a nation-wide teacher evaluation system that officially links teachers' performance with their salary. Apart from reiterating the basic principles of the teaching profession such as adhering to laws, regulations, and codes of practice, the policy specifies the four areas as the scope of evaluation for the merit pay for all teachers: moral education, teaching, researching, and career development; and for head class teachers, there are the additional categories of class management, pastoral care, and event organisation (*ibid.*).

A necessary characteristic of any evaluation system is quantitative measuring. The teacher evaluation system seems to be particularly so, and such an emphasis of quantitative measuring has been much criticised in literature. Duan and Yao (2003) note that the teacher evaluation system may prevent educators from developing a more comprehensive perspective on teaching, as the quantitative methods may overly emphasise teachers' commonality and specific teaching outcomes, making teachers less creative and lose sight of the bigger picture of education. Liu (2011) similarly identifies that teacher evaluation often disproportionately focuses more on the administrative chores than the actual teaching, and it is difficult to design quantitative criteria to effectively motivate better teaching. Thus, heavily relying on quantitative methods, it can be said that the current teacher evaluation system does not fully represent the complexity of educational phenomena.

The teacher evaluation system can powerfully shape teachers' priorities: teachers are overwhelmingly occupied with improving students' exam results, leading to pedagogical practices that often focus on teaching to the test. Under such circumstances, children with

SEND may be seen as extra stress and burdens who affect teachers' evaluation results. The teacher evaluation system thus underlies part of the "wicked problems" for practising inclusion in terms of pedagogy and attitude.

Admittedly, it may not be an easy task to incorporate inclusion into the current teacher evaluation system. The 'soft' and qualitative aspects of emotions, wellbeing, and inclusivity can be difficult to quantify. Regarding children with SEND, factors such as the amount, form, and result of additional support are also difficult to verify or measure. Inclusion as a process also happens across a long period of time with subtle and even undetectable changes. However, without the incentive of inclusion being part of the teacher evaluation system, or in other words, with the competing priorities listed by the existing teacher evaluation policies that often focus on teachers academic teaching performance as reflected by their student's exam grades, it can be quite difficult for teachers to go the extra mile and commit themselves to promoting inclusivity for children with SEND.

Promoting inclusion in Chinese schools necessarily means that the teacher evaluation system needs to change to reflect the inclusion agenda, to provide according incentives for teachers, and to inspire, support, and sustain their inclusive initiatives in the long run. This means to combat against the positivistic trend in education management, where quantitative measurements are considered 'scientific' and trustworthy, while the qualitative aspects are largely neglected. It also means to recognise and overcome other limitations of the teacher evaluation on the whole. For example, Wang (2010) notes that the current system heavily focuses on the utilitarian purpose, partial content, and rigid standards of education; consequently, teachers may feel constantly under considerable pressure of work and less confident or enthusiastic about their teaching. Lü and He (2011) find in a survey with 200 teachers regarding their views on the teacher evaluation system that most of teachers think

the evaluation framework is unfair, as there is no difference between teachers who have different workloads.

For inclusion to work, the teacher evaluation system needs to be questioned and reformed, not just for the purpose of creating room and incentives for more inclusive pedagogical practice and fostering positive teacher attitudes towards inclusion, but also for the general well-being of the teachers and students, for a more humanistic rather than mechanic outlook of education, and for more effective and relevant teaching and learning.

### ***Bianzhi* (Staffing Quota System): Large Class Size and Shortage of Teachers**

*Bianzhi* is a national human resource management system used across state-run enterprises such as schools, universities, governments, and hospitals (Gu, 1998). It is part of the tradition of central planning in socialist regimes. Employees who are within the *bianzhi* are permanently employed and paid by the state. Their base salaries across levels of pay grades are also fixed by the state. Their jobs are usually referred to as 'iron bowls' of employment stability. The quotas are fixed numbers. The national guideline (MoE, 2001a) stipulates that the pupil adult ratio in urban primary schools should be 19:1. This ratio includes the heavy management layers, meaning that the actual student-teacher ratio is still higher. With the quota restriction, schools cannot employ more staff than the fixed pupil adult ratio requires. Despite the increasing educational demands, the same ratio remains until the present day. This has created barriers to the inclusion of children with SEND in terms of large class sizes and heavy teacher workload due to teacher shortage. These conditions often further contribute to the pedagogy of teacher-centred whole-class teaching and a greater need for classroom discipline control, which is part of a "wicked problem" for practising inclusion.

The negative effects of large class sizes on learning in general have been much debated in the literature. Many (Deng & Manset, 2000; McCabe, 2003; Xiao, 2007) argue

that large class sizes may discourage teachers from developing or using more individualised teaching methods. A teacher survey by Leahy (2006) finds that teachers strongly agree that larger class sizes are linked to lower student achievement. Stevenson (2006) similarly concludes that smaller classes may improve academic performance, student behaviour, and teacher morale, and that it especially benefits the at-risk students.

For children with SEND, smaller classes may be particularly helpful. For example, arguing for smaller class sizes, Blatchford and Webster (2018, 18) call large class sizes “the elephant in the room” for the inclusion of children with SEND. They maintain that large class sizes often lead to the use of whole-class teaching; this can be unhelpful for children with SEND, as they may have difficulties following instructions and therefore need more individualised and differentiated support; yet in a large class setting, such support can be less likely (*ibid.*; Webster & Blatchford, 2017). The appeal for smaller class sizes for inclusion is not a recent trend. Two decades ago, Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) suggested that for children with SEND to be truly included, the mainstream classrooms should have no more than 20 students. In parts of the world, the standard classroom size in public primary education is not far from this number. For example, according to the OECD (2019) data in 2016, the average number of students per class was 27 in the UK, 21 in the US, and 19 in Sweden. In contrast, a class of 45 students is already considered a ‘small class’ in China.

However, for the situation to change, there is not yet a readily available solution. *Bianzhi* is strictly controlled from top-down. As a common characteristic of central plans, they can be inflexible and insensitive to local needs. In addition, cracking down corruption has been a growing theme in recent years in the Chinese government (Wen *et al.*, 2017). This involves stricter control of the staffing quota to prevent redundant roles or loopholes that

drain the state funds. This sweeping approach also denies local schools' needs for more teachers.

Thus, to tackle large class sizes and teacher shortage so as to allow more space for inclusion, *bianzhi*, at least in schools, needs to be reformed accordingly. The government has recognised the need and has recently abolished the system in higher educational institutions and state-run hospitals (National Development and Reform Commission, 2017). The hope is that in time, similar reforms may also apply to primary and secondary schools. Further research and debate are needed to create momentum to push forward such changes.

### ***Yi Jiao Jiehe* (Combining Medicine and Education): The Medical Model of Disability**

*Yi jiao jiehe* was officially introduced as a term in special education in 2009 (MoE, 2009), when East China Normal University in Shanghai was commissioned to act as a key experimental base to conduct pilot programmes which explored ways to combine medical rehabilitation and education within special schools. In the pilot schools, some medical facilities were installed, and teachers were supposed to be specifically trained with relevant medical and rehabilitative knowledge. Having considered the pilots to be successful, in 2015, the MoE designated 37 cities and municipal districts to be the experimental areas for special education reforms, where further programmes of *yi jiao jiehe* can be carried out before eventually expanding the initiative nation-wide (MoE, 2015b). In 2017, the latest *Special Education Promotion Plan 2017-2020* (MoE, 2017) listed “enhancing *yi jiao jiehe*” as the first strategy of improving the quality of special education.

*Yi jiao jiehe* has so far predominantly taken place in special schools (MoE, 2015b), while LRC settings saw some sporadic effort with independent initiatives (Song et al., 2020).

The commonly reported implementation involves training teachers with medical and therapeutic knowledge and skills (Changsha Special School, 2018; East China Normal University, 2012), as well as having visiting or in-school medical professionals in special schools conducting regular individual intervention or treatment sessions with students in areas such as sensory integration, mobility, social communication, emotion and behaviour, speech and language, and cognition, depending on students' specific needs (Gao, 2016; He et al., 2019). Despite some medical benefits intended by *yi jiao jiehe*, such practices inevitably blur the boundary of special schools as educational institutions and teachers as educators (Deng & Lu, 2012; Lu, 2013). The increasing focus on “medical treatment” or “rehabilitation” may also serve to stigmatise special schools as ‘not real schools’, further alienating their students and teachers from the mainstream.

*Yi jiao jiehe* policy may impact teachers' daily work in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher attitude towards children with SEND, which are categories among the “wicked problems” for practising inclusive education. The policy's clear medical emphasis reinforces an individual deficit perspective of disability, maintaining that children with SEND need to be “treated” or “cured” including when they are in an educational setting. Focusing on training teachers to become semi-medical professionals also distracts from how curriculum needs to be adjusted to become broader and more relevant to meet students' needs. Such medical training also demotivates teachers from making an effort toward effective pedagogical innovation when facing challenges inside the classrooms, as the “problem” can be seen as needing medical rather than pedagogical solutions. In the long run, the clear medical emphasis in these teachers' daily work can perpetuate the divisive and stigmatising view that children with SEND necessarily need separate provisions which are usually not available in the mainstream setting.

Deeply, ‘combining medicine and education’ reflects the dominance of medical discourse of disability in China’s special education. The legal definition of people with disability in China is:

“one who suffers from abnormalities of loss of a certain organ or function, psychologically or physiologically, or in anatomical structure and has lost wholly or in part the ability to perform an activity in the way considered normal.” (NPC, 1990/2017, Article 2)

Clearly, this is a medical definition. The language heavily relies on natural science and treats disability as “individual’s inability to function” (Barton, 1993, 237). This is contrasted by the WHO (2011, 7) definition which adopts a social model:

“Disability refers to the negative aspects of the interaction between individuals with a health condition (such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, depression) and personal and environmental factors (such as negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social supports).”

The medical discourse of disability in China is not without its cultural underpinning. The traditional Chinese culture has been characterised as a ‘shame culture’ (Zhuang & Bresnahan, 2017). As a complex social and moral emotion, shame is associated with failures and shortcomings and implies a sense of incompetence and inferiority especially when seen or judged by others (Fung, 1999). The emphasis on shame in the Chinese culture can be seen as implicitly preached in Confucianism. For example, a Confucian *junzi* (person of superior virtues) or *shengren* (sage) is a virtuous person who at least knows shame (ibid.), and Confucius maintained that: “if the people be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given



them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good” (Analects, 2.3). The emotion of shame has been used in the traditional Chinese culture as a powerful persuasion to influence attitudes and change behaviours. This can still be evident in special and inclusive education today. As shame cultures are largely based on pride and honour, parents may see it as a failure and experience shame if their children are deemed as having SEND (Fung et al., 2007). This feeling has led some parents to attempt to hide their children with a recognised disability at home (Tait, Mundia & Fung, 2014). The shame culture can serve as a powerful mental barrier for parents of children with SEND, their teachers, as well as the general public to avoid challenging the medical discourse of disability or the unfair and ineffective education these children often receive.

This dominance of the medical model in Chinese special education helps to explain why despite its apparently divisive, stigmatising, and alienating effects, *yi jiao jiehe* operates as a national policy and enjoys much support from scholars and teachers. In a systematic review of 70 key academic publications, Yang and Li (2016) conclude that 68 per cent of the authors support and promote *yi jiao jiehe*, while only 16 per cent openly criticise and oppose the idea. Furthermore, among teachers, popular support for the system was also found. A survey conducted by Zhang (2014) with 184 special school teachers shows that 97.3 per cent of the respondents overwhelmingly support *yi jiao jiehe* and think it can be beneficial for improving special education, while only five teachers posited against the idea.

Reasons for support can be seen from three main aspects. First, it is argued that considering the current state of public healthcare in China - limited social welfare, under-developed health services, usually crowded hospitals, and likely expensive medical bills -, integrating medicine as part of compulsory education in special schools may offer hope to provide a fast stream for some families with children who need regular or sophisticated

medical interventions to receive support and alleviate their financial burdens (Fang, 2017; Zhao, Cui & Ding, 2017). Second, some (Shen, 2012; Zhang, 2013) maintain that *yi jiao jiehe* may be a conservative and indirect approach to inclusion, because it may shed light on developing effective SEND strategies, potentially contributing to inclusive pedagogies in mainstream schools when borrowed. Third, limited research (Gao, 2016; He et al., 2019) on evaluating the effectiveness of implementing *yi jiao jiehe* in special schools, usually adopting quantitative methods to measure students' performance before and after a period of intervention, have reported cases with claimed improvement across a range of predefined medical indicators. These research may be used to support *yi jiao jiehe* as an effective education strategy overall, despite their predominant medical gaze.

Meanwhile, critics also recognise the problematic implications of *yi jiao jiehe*. Deng and Lu (2012) argue that it is impractical and wishful to think special school teachers can act like 'doctors' while still fulfilling their roles as educators, and that *yi jiao jiehe* has the danger of compromising the nature of special schools as educational institutions with the medical focus. In a similar vein, Lu (2013) claims that *yi jiao jiehe* is regressive, as it not only diminishes the educational purpose of special schools, but also reinforces the excluding thinking by treating some children as 'patients' rather than students. She further maintains that the idea causes inconsistency, confusion, and unfairness within the entire special education system, because the emphasis on introducing medicine into special education is mostly applied to students in special schools, but not those on an LRC placement in mainstream schools who may have similar needs or conditions (*ibid.*).

As a way forward, a variation of the term - *kang jiao jiehe* (combining health and education) - has been used in academic debates in recent years (Dong, 2021; Li & Cui, 2015). It may lessen the otherwise strong medical emphasis by replacing *yi* (medicine) with the

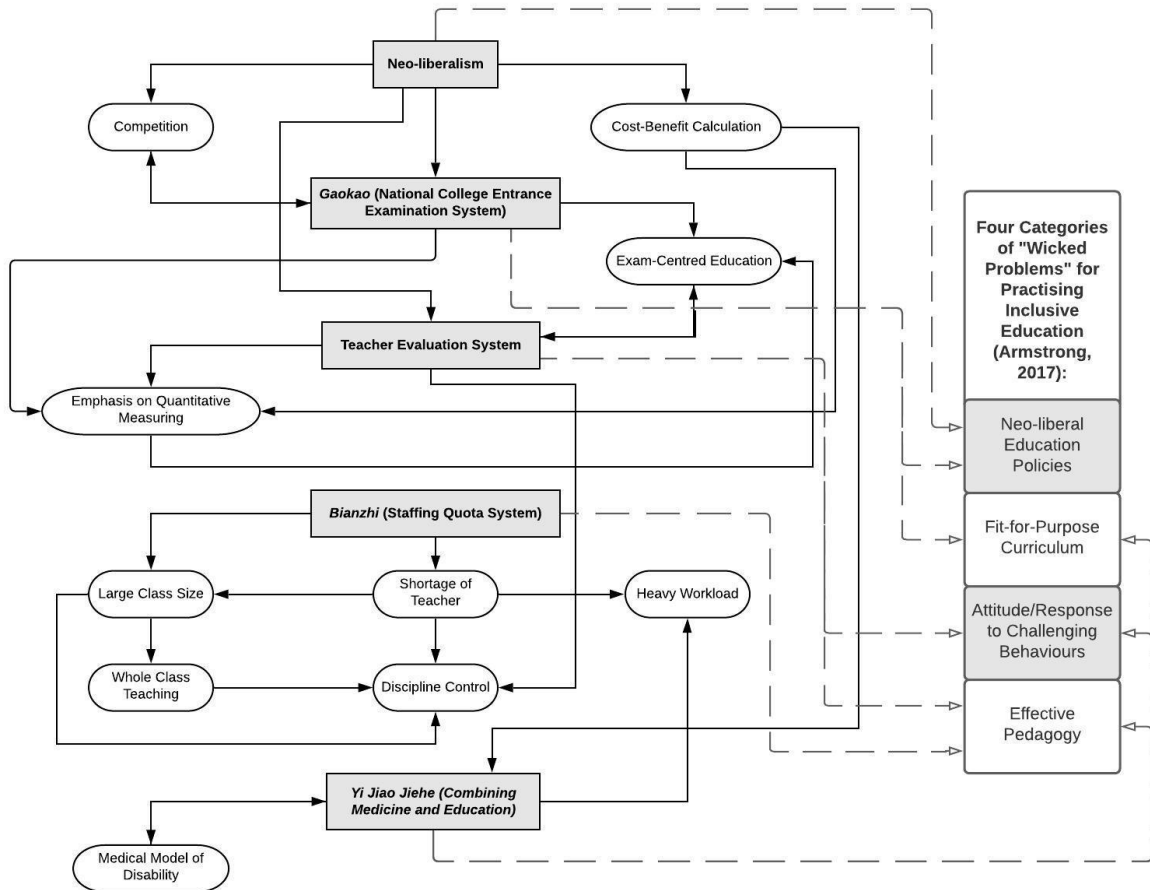
notion of health in general. This signals a more inclusive concept, as health – physical, mental, and social - that does not only concern children with SEND, but is important and relevant for everyone. This may offer implications for improving inclusive education elsewhere. In many parts of the world, such as UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and the Scandinavian countries, it is common for occupational, speech and physical therapists to work in schools, where they are considered as part of the school community and contributing to meeting the needs of children with SEND (DfES, 2004; Suc, Bukovec & Karpljuk, 2017; Swinth, Spencer & Jackson 2007). Although such cooperation of different professionals is recognised as essential for creating a supportive and inclusive school environment (Charitaki et al., 2018; Qu, 2020), the therapists and medical professionals working in educational settings have nonetheless been challenged to move beyond the medical model of disability to an inclusive system that cares for the health of all members of the school community (Ball, 2018; Struthers, 2005).

In summary, inclusion necessarily requires a turn-away from the medical discourse in special education and more towards the social and rights model of disability. As Ainscow (2007, 6) argues, for inclusion to work, “a new way of thinking” is needed. The current *yijiao jiehé* agenda works to reinforce the medical discourse of disability, yet at the same time, its variation ‘*kang jiao jiehé*’ (combining health and education) may still offer potential for progressive changes, where all children’s health needs are important and catered for.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown how the fabric of the Chinese education system is woven with multiple structures and sub-structures in complex ways, and how the “wicked problems” for practising inclusive education is reflected in these structural barriers. See Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1: Structural Barriers to Inclusion in the Chinese Education System**



As the figure shows, these structural barriers unique to the Chinese education system also reflect aspects of the global “wicked problems” for practising inclusive education. These structural barriers are complex and inter-linked over multiple layers. Some underpin others; some mutually reinforce one another; and some form a loop strengthening, preserving, and perpetuating themselves. This makes it challenging, for example, to shift away from the exam-centred education, as both *Gaokao* and the teacher evaluation system need to change. These structures then cannot be separated from a culture of competition, assessment and accountability driven by neo-liberal values, a strong theme that is not only present in China

but also elsewhere (Armstrong, 2002; Gleeson & Husbands, 2001; Scott, 2017). Thus, in order to overcome one barrier, multiple related structures and the fundamental drives need to be taken into account accordingly.

In addition to the structural barriers discussed in this paper, the absences of certain structures are also barriers to inclusive education in China. For example, there have not been systematic social welfare organisations to support children with severe needs after they leave school, and that these children seemed to have no place to go when they became adults apart from staying at home and being looked after by their families. This social exclusion, together with educational exclusion, forms a vicious cycle against inclusion.

Structural challenges facing inclusion are complex and persisting, in China and elsewhere. As UNESCO (2005, 9) identifies that globally, 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 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).

Therefore, for inclusion policy reforms to be effective, key reforms at least within these five key education sub-systems are needed. Such reforms need to be oriented towards main objectives including turning away from narrowly focusing on competition, a cost-benefit economic view of education, exam-centred education, and a medical model of disability; making sure there are enough teachers and they do not feel constantly snowed under by heavy workload in large class sizes; and establishing fairer teacher evaluation system to provide incentives for individual teachers to promote inclusion. In particular, the

culture of performativity driven by neo-liberal values requires further intellectual debates and moral justification. It is also important that there is a heightened awareness among policymakers across multiple departments to take a broad and holistic perspective for reforms to be effective and relevant to local needs. School cannot change in isolation. Future research is urgently needed to closely examine how each of these structural barriers may be addressed in practice to bring about change towards greater inclusion. It is also important to further analyse how the key structural barriers to inclusive education in China are embedded within the wider local social, cultural, political, and economic contexts.

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