Inclusive education is an active area of policy development and reform in China. Guangdong province has made great strides in implementing inclusive education, especially in the economically developed Pearl River Delta region that includes the provincial capital Guangzhou City. However, the development of inclusive education in the province is imbalanced, with underdeveloped areas lagging behind.

Often, the greatest challenge facing proponents of inclusive education is a lack of acceptance of children with disabilities and a lack of understanding of inclusive education. To explore this challenge in the context of China, a team of researchers carried out a survey of stakeholders’ attitudes to and perceptions of inclusive education in a set of underdeveloped counties that are to be included in the Guangdong Compulsory Education Project.

**Background**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes the right of people with disabilities to education, while Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commits the global community to: “[ensuring] equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities” by 2030.

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Despite these international commitments, the approximately 5.8 million school-age children with disabilities in China face significant difficulties in accessing education. The rate of school dropouts among children with disabilities aged between 6 and 17 years old is 34.74 percent, and more than half of these children never go to school at all (Hou, 2015).

Historically, in China, special education for disabled children was mainly provided at special schools, often specializing in specific impairments. However, since the end of the 1980s, there has been an increasingly supportive policy environment for admitting children with disabilities into “regular” Chinese schools, in other words, those
designed for typically developed children, but with appropriate support. This form of special education is referred to as “Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC).” Consequently, more and more children with specific educational needs have been admitted to regular Chinese schools – from 115,300 in 1994 to 239,600 in 2015, which is more than half (52.94 percent) of all students with specific educational needs who are enrolled in schools.

In LRC practice, resource rooms are used to help students with specific educational needs to learn in regular classroom environments. These rooms bridge the learning experience between special education class settings and full-immersion regular classrooms by providing supplementary resources for children with specific educational needs such as extra teaching equipment and facilities, textbook resources, and aides. To date, only about 100 Chinese counties and county-level municipalities out of a total of 2,850⁴ have successfully established resource rooms.

The Challenge of Extending Inclusive Education

There are several reasons for countries to develop a more inclusive education system: (i) enabling schools to respond effectively to individual differences to the benefit of all children; (ii) cultivating a more accepting attitude among children; and (iii) providing more cost-effective education while also achieving equality and human rights goals. v

Location and Methodology

The data for this study was collected from a variety of stakeholders including school officials, teachers, parents, and students. The 14 counties included in this study are all located in the less developed eastern, western, and northern regions of Guangdong. vi The counties are:

- Eastern Region: Cha’o’an, Chaoyang, Haifeng, Lufeng, Huilai, Jiexi, and Puning
- Western Region: Leizhou, Lianjiang, Suixi, Wuchuan, Luoding, and Huazhou
- Northern Region: Wengyuan.

Findings

This study identified the following challenges for inclusive education at the school level in the selected counties:

- Insufficient curriculum resources: Most regular schools have not made curriculum adjustments for children with specific educational needs. Neither have they arranged any of the necessary supplementary special education courses.
- Insufficient individualized learning plans: Most regular schools fail to prepare any individualized learning plans. These are learning plans for each individual student with disabilities based on their specific abilities and needs. In the absence of these plans, these students often do not receive the auxiliary services that they need to learn in a regular classroom. Even in schools that have attempted to move in this direction, these plans have neither been fully developed nor effectively implemented.
- Insufficient accessible infrastructure: Ensuring access to school facilities, information, and communications is key to enabling students with specific educational needs to attend regular schools. However, most schools have failed to provide the basic accessible infrastructure that these students need, particularly those with physical disabilities.
- Not enough relevant special education services: Inclusive education relies heavily on special education services. Schools in most areas of the 14 counties need such services, particularly rehabilitation resources and personnel for children with cerebral palsy and adaptive equipment for the physically disabled.
- Lack of parental involvement in schools: The parents of students with disabilities and those
of children without disabilities have not been fully engaged in inclusive education. Nor have the education authorities adequately established connections with community institutions such as local hospitals or the Disabled Persons’ Federation (DPF) to find ways to support parents and students with disabilities.

- **Lack of resource rooms**: Some schools in the 14 counties have established resource rooms with dedicated space and equipment, but they lack professional staff to manage these rooms, and most regular schools have neither resource rooms nor the necessary staff. Thus, while existing policies allow many children with disabilities to enroll in regular schools, these students are not provided with an adequate support system in those schools.

**Recommendations**

Based on these findings, the study laid out the following recommendations:

**Shift the Paradigm**

The paradigm needs to shift from “learning in regular classes” to “inclusive education” in recognition of the fact that students with disabilities have a basic right to attend regular schools and that inclusive education benefits not only students with disabilities but the entire school community. County governments should promote this new paradigm in public information campaigns and should organize activities such as an Inclusive Education Promotion Week modeled after the Inclusive Education Promotion Month in Beijing and the “Rong Ai Xing” (Inclusion, Care, Action) campaign in Guangzhou.

**Align Local Policies with Existing National Policies**

Local policies are not fully aligned with national and provincial policies on inclusive education. The coverage of students with specific educational needs should expand from the three traditional categories (visual impairment, hearing impairment, and intellectual disabilities) to the full eight categories specified in the *People with Disabilities Act of the People’s Republic of China*. In addition, local governments should ensure that no school can deny access to any child within their school district who is legally qualified to enroll.

**Develop a System for Implementing Inclusive Education**

The education authorities of all counties should incorporate inclusive education into the planning for special education and regular education, define the respective responsibilities of regular schools and special schools, and establish a management system to regulate the teaching and learning of students with specific educational needs in regular classes. They should also consider establishing a three-level management network consisting of: (i) regular and special schools; (ii) districts and county-level cities; and (iii) cities.

**Build Teams**

Based on the three-level management network, the education authorities should set up management teams and implementation teams at each of these levels. The management teams in the districts and county-level cities would be responsible for all guidance and training related to inclusive education across the whole county or city. The school-based management teams would be responsible for the operation of the resource rooms established in schools. The implementation teams consisting of the relevant officials in the county Bureaus of
Education as well as regular teachers and resource teachers in regular schools would oversee putting inclusive education into practice within schools. In addition, the county governments should establish a team comprised of parents, community workers, DPF staff, and medical staff who, by pooling their resources, can provide services for students with disabilities.

**Develop Resources to Support Individualized Education**

The curriculum of regular schools must be adapted to meet the needs of all students, including those with specific educational needs. Each student with specific educational needs should be taught according to an individualized learning plan (ILP) developed specifically for that student by resource teachers and a team comprised of discipline teachers, parents, and rehabilitation professionals. The ILP should be carried out by a three-dimensional support system comprised of the school, the family, and the community. After an ILP has been implemented, its impact on the student’s development must be evaluated and the ILP should be adjusted accordingly if necessary.

**Construct Resource Rooms**

County governments should expressly stipulate rules covering the establishment of resource rooms. County education authorities should leverage human and technical resources from special education schools and build and administer a central resource center that can benefit children with specific educational needs.

**Build an Accessible Environment and Apply Auxiliary Technologies**

The counties must make a greater effort to make appropriate modifications to school campuses to ensure their accessibility to students with disabilities. The schools themselves should also acquire auxiliary tools such as wheelchairs and use tablets or other modern telecommunication technologies to teach disabled students.

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**Notes**

i This brief is based on the findings of research conducted by Prof. Jiacheng Xu of Beijing Union University and Prof. Shouhong Wei of Chongqing Normal University in collaboration with officials from the county governments. For details on the project please visit [http://projects.worldbank.org/P154621?lang=en](http://projects.worldbank.org/P154621?lang=en) or [http://projects.shihang.org/P154621?lang=zh](http://projects.shihang.org/P154621?lang=zh).


iv Data from the China Statistical Yearbook 2016.


vi The fieldwork for this study was carried out between March 21 and April 15, 2016.