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Blog 2

Jinting Wu, Disability Segregation in an Age of Inclusion: Navigating Educational Pathways through Special Education Schools in Contemporary China



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Introduction: Across the globe, the impact of child disability on educational inequality has been relatively neglected. My current research focuses on the rising number of children with disabilities who grow up with stigma and bleak futures in China's segregated special schools. By focusing on a uniquely marginalized population in a segregated educational setting, this research fills a compelling need to understand the intersection of disability and segregation – a dual marginality that continues to exist globally yet remains under-examined in educational, legal, and disability studies literature to date.

Disability Segregation in an Age of Inclusion: Navigating Educational Pathways through Special Education Schools in Contemporary China

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Keywords: Educational Inequality, Disability, Child Disability, Education Policy, Inequality, Culture and Society, Segregation, Special needs, Marginalized populations, Urban studies, Discrimination, Inclusivity.

Across the globe, the impact of child disability on educational inequality has been relatively neglected. My current research focuses on the rising number of children with disabilities who grow up with stigma and bleak futures in China's segregated special schools. By focusing on a uniquely marginalized population in a segregated educational setting, this research fills a compelling need to understand the intersection of disability and segregation – a dual marginality that continues to exist globally yet remains under-examined in educational, legal, and disability studies literature to date.

Children with special needs are by and large judged unfit in mainstream Chinese schools focused on high-performing test-takers and “high quality” future citizens. Since the early 2000s, the Chinese state has intensified efforts in building special education schools as a form of “bureaucratic benevolence.” There, rising numbers of children with special needs are removed from regular school peers, and grow up with stigma and bleak employment prospects. Chinese policymakers consider special schools a necessary evil to help China transition to a fully inclusive model.

Globally, segregated placement continues to exist even in the most inclusive education systems. In today's China, as elsewhere, the embrace of inclusive rhetoric has not led to the disappearance of special schools. One answer to this continued structural segregation is stigma. In China, bodily impairments have historically been perceived as disorder, and subject to derogatory vocabularies and moral condemnation. The state-driven goal of cultivating “high quality” citizens with optimal physical, mental, and educational attributes intensifies parental desires to bear healthy and competitive offspring. Meanwhile, popular eugenic thoughts privilege “normal” reproductive outcomes, leading to social stigma of child disability as a source of shame and blame. Many parents conceal their children's conditions in order to enroll them into regular schools. Some eventually opt for special schools, after seeing their children turned away or treated poorly in regular schools.

In a society upholding an ableist vision of normal bodies and academic meritocracy, special schools are sites of precarious social identities where disability intersects with class, gender, culture, and state power to tell a unique story. Marginalized populations, such as migrant workers' children, are often denied access to local public schools because of their non-urban household registration (*hukou*) and low socioeconomic status. Migrant children with disabilities encounter even greater odds in obtaining state educational services, an injustice stemming from the systematic discrimination and exclusion experienced by migrant populations in urban spaces. The general absence of migrant children in urban special schools is juxtaposed by the constant physical presence of mothers who quit jobs to become full-time caretakers for their children. The deep-rooted patriarchal and ableist ideologies define motherhood primarily in raising a healthy, academically talented child. Birthing a disabled child is considered bad karma, casting a shadow over the mother's moral social standing.

Disability is a profoundly relational category, as a society can handicap people with or without a disability. In China's special schools, not only are children stigmatized, but also their close relations (adult guardians and teachers) who do not have a disability yet also experience forms of disablism. Special teachers, foot soldiers of disability education, occupy a paradoxical position in simultaneously holding the space of segregation while struggling for recognition, in both being stigmatized and praised as pioneers in child-centered pedagogies vis-a-vis teacher authoritarianism in regular schools. They play a crucial role in (re)defining disability and negotiating with state special education policies.

It is important not to point fingers at disability segregation as a complete policy failure. Globalization has not produced a homogeneous "world culture" of special education, as each country has particular social, cultural and policy contexts that drive unique responses to the global inclusive trend. What is needed is serious research to understand the subjective experience of how grassroots agents make sense of segregation in day-to-day struggle, negotiation, and creativity. This research challenges the global inclusive rhetoric as "one size fits all" and illustrates special schools not as oppressive apparatus, but transient spaces of marginality and potentiality in today's China. It contributes to a more expansive dialogue on special education beyond the inclusion-exclusion binary and sheds light on alternative realities to gain a situated, comparative, and diversified understanding of disability education in the global south.