Rethinking Norms and Collectivism in China's Inclusive Education – Moving Teachers' Understanding beyond Integration

Xiao QU

UCL IoE

20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL

qu.xiao@hotmail.com

Abstract

The global debates over inclusive education have long moved beyond the archaic notion of physical integration and more towards the meaningful participation in education, children's rights, and breaking down institutional barriers. The latest inclusion policy in China also recognises the need for schools to develop provisions to accommodate additional learner needs. However, Chinese teachers may still view inclusion as mere physical integration. This paper focuses on one key theme arising from a qualitative study and explores in-depth the possible causes behind teachers' interpretation of inclusion as physical integration to offer deeper understanding of how to move China's inclusive education forward. Drawing from 37 interviews with mainstream primary school teachers in a Chinese city, this paper illustrates how teachers' non-inclusive views can be embedded within the local culture, explaining how some teachers focused on physical attendance based on normalising values, while others emphasised assimilation as part of the collective culture. The paper aims to unsettle the often taken-for-granted beliefs regarding norms and collectivism in the Chinese culture. The conclusion suggests areas for change.

Keywords: physical attendance, assimilation, traditional Chinese culture, interpretation, normalising and collective society, alternative

Introduction

Up until the late 1990s, the notion of physical integration - the opposite of a separate education for student with disabilities – had often been confused with inclusion. For example, in the UK, the inclusion belief used to be that "placement in a mainstream school leads naturally on to the other forms of inclusion" (DfEE, 1997, 23). Yet the simple location transfer continued to entail isolation and segregation, as integration was still based on the notion of ideal pupil types and deficit individuals (Harrower, 1999; Hegarty, 1993). This was essentially assimilation rather than inclusion. In this regard, Cooper and Jacobs (2011, 6) described the physical integration as a delusion, as "being present in a school equating with being socially and educationally included is one of the most dishonest and insidious form of exclusion". Today, inclusion in global debates has moved beyond the archaic notion of integration and more towards the quality of education, children's rights, and breaking down institutional barriers (UN, 2006, 2015; UNESCO, 2014, 2015). The latest inclusion policy in China (MoE, 2014, 2017) - currently encapsulated as 'Learning in Regular Classrooms' [LRC] (*sui ban jiudu*) - similarly affirms the needs for mainstream schools to develop provisions to accommodate additional learner needs particularly for children with a recognised disability.

However, as the front-line practitioners of inclusion/exclusion, the Chinese teachers may still view and practise inclusion as mere physical integration (Liu & Zhang, 2017; Peng, 2011; Song & Liu, 2012; Xiao, 2005; Xu & Zhao, 2017). Being present in a mainstream school does not necessarily mean meaningful participation in education. For example, in Guan's (2017) study, 113 head class teachers from inclusive mainstream schools in Beijing were surveyed about the 151 students on LRC placements in their classes. The study finds that 66.72 per cent of students with intellectual impairments and 78.57 per cent of students with autism were reportedly either completely unengaged or need constant reminding to engage in learning in class; only 36.26 per cent of the teachers responded that they have paid frequent attention to students with the LRC status; and 73.63 per cent of the teachers said they had focused firstly on classroom order and discipline rather than participation and learning outcomes when paying attention to these students (*ibid.*). This result is not surprising, as LRC placement often means the students can be exempted from exams, which are commonly seen as a central focus of school education (Liu & Su, 2014).

In addition, children on an LRC placement in mainstream schools may still experience social isolation and rejection from their typically developing peers. For example, Song and

Liu (2012) found in their qualitative case studies in Beijing that three out of four children with LRC status were rejected and marginalised by their classmates, and their teachers appeared to be oblivious of the situation. Similarly, Liu and Zhang (2017) interviewed 137 typically developing children aged eight and nine from three classes in a rural school in Gansu Province about their attitudes towards their five classmates with physical impairment. Results show limited active and effective interactions between the two groups of children, and that the five pupils with physical impairments appear to be disliked and rejected by their classmates (*ibid.*). The reason behind is not only that some children with disabilities may lack adequate social skills, but also that many typically developing children are told by their parents to stay away from their peers with LRC status, who are often portrayed as 'defective' and bringing bad influence (Xu & Zhao, 2017). Clearly, children with disabilities being in the same mainstream classroom with others does not mean that they will automatically get along with others or be considered a belonged member of the class. In short, the practices of LRC often resembled integration more than inclusion.

This paper therefore explores possible causes behind teachers seeing inclusion as mere physical integration, so as to offer deeper understanding of how to move China's inclusive education forward. Drawing from 37 interviews with mainstream primary school teachers in a Chinese city, this paper illustrates how teachers' non-inclusive views can be embedded within the local culture, explaining how some teachers focused on physical attendance based on normalising values, while others emphasised assimilation as part of the collective culture. The paper aims to draw attention to and unsettle the often taken-for-granted beliefs regarding norms and collectivism in the Chinese culture. The conclusion suggests a discourse shift towards celebrating learner diversity through re-visiting the wisdom from traditional Chinese culture. This may offer future possibility for constructing alternative theoretical bases for China's inclusion that are compatible with the local cultural context. It may also create the necessary intellectual space for teachers to develop deeper understanding of the inclusion concept beyond physical integration.

Method

This study is a qualitative research conducted in 2016 using semi-structured interviews to explore the complexity of teachers' understanding of the inclusion concept. This exploratory study aims to indicate avenues for further debates without delineating definitive conclusions. It does not concern predictions through measuring objective, generalisable, or replicable events. Instead, the focus is on possible explanations of teachers' understanding and practices

concerning inclusion to advance insights of an intricate social phenomenon in the open system of the social world.

37 teachers from four mainstream schools in a Chinese city were interviewed in locations where teachers felt comfortable, such as their offices, playground, and meeting rooms. The sampling aimed for a cross-section of participants taking into account seniority of position, length of tenure, training background, gender and types of responsibility for special needs. Participants includes: two headteachers, 14 head class teachers from both lower grades and higher grades, nine academic subject teachers, eight non-academic subject teachers, and four school administrative staff, with mixed gender, years of experience, and qualifications.1 32 participants were female, as school staff were predominantly female. Most were recommended by the headteachers; some were referred by their colleagues who were participants themselves; and some others were identified and approached by myself during my two weeks' time in each of the sampled schools.

The interviews were arranged by headteachers, school administrators, or myself directly liaising with the teachers. They last about 40-60 minutes each and were recorded with consent for later transcription. In accordance with the aim of the study, main interview questions concerned teachers' concepts, practices, and experiences with children with disabilities in their classrooms. For example: 'how do you understand the concept of inclusion?', 'what is it like to teach children with disabilities in your class?', and 'what do you think an ideal inclusive school would be like?'

After transcribing all the interview recordings which were in Chinese, I read through the transcripts for multiple times and used thematic coding to highlight common and recurring themes that emerged from the data (Bell, 2010; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). In this process, the texts were broken down into chunks – words, sentences, paragraphs – according to themes so as to be examined for meaning. Selected quotes were translated from Mandarin Chinese into English to be used as illustrative texts. Participant details using pseudonyms are given for those who are quoted in this paper after the illustrative quotes in brackets. Notes of informal observations in schools such as the arrangement of physical space and routine activities are included to offer contextualised understanding.

Considering the importance and complexity of the topic, this paper reports on one key theme of 'inclusion as integration' (21 teachers). This means teachers mainly saw 'inclusion'

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1 In a Chinese school, the 'head class teacher' is equivalent to the form tutor of a British school. This teacher however will play a leading role in the life and welfare of all class members for the duration of their time in school, and the role will usually occupy the bulk of their weekly time as a teacher. These form the basis of the pastoral system within the school.

as the physical presence of children in mainstream schools without mentioning their active participation in learning or the need to break down institutional barriers. The focus on one theme is necessary to offer in-depth interpretation and exploration of data. Other main themes will be explored in separate papers.

Analysis and Interpretation

Among the 21 teachers who saw inclusion as integration, two sub-themes arose: inclusion as physical attendance based on normalising values, and as assimilation underpinned by a collective culture. The following two sections detail the analysis and interpretation of these two themes.

Physical Attendance – A Normative Discourse

Inclusion was not defined or specifically promoted as a priority in special education in China until 2017 (MoE, 2017; State Council, 2017). The ambiguous definition - "to integrate the education for disabled students into regular education to the largest extend" (State Council, 2017) – does not distinguish integration from inclusion. It was thus not surprising that in 2016 when the research was conducted, most teachers were unaware of and even confused about the meaning of inclusion. 23 out of the 37 teachers said they did not previously know about the term *quan na jiaoyu* (official translation of inclusive education), and that they understood the term in a character-by-character interpretation: 'all (*quan*) admitting (*na*) education (*jiaoyu*)'. This clearly has a single focus on the physical attendance. To illustrate, for example:

> "Inclusive education is to allow the problematic children to attend classes together with others in regular schools." (Yanyan, English teacher, Grade Five)

> "It doesn't matter if the children have psychological problems or physical defects, we let them attend classes together with other children and let them feel they can have normal interaction and communication with others." (Liuchang, Art teacher, Grade Two & Four)

"It means to uniformly admit some children with intellectual problems or abnormal behaviours into the normal classes." (Quan, Maths teacher, Grade Three)

Clearly, the dominant discourse used by teachers to refer to children with disabilities was negative and medically focused. Derogatory terms such as 'problematic children', 'defects', and 'abnormal' bear strong reference to the distinction of abnormality from normality, which, contrary to what they were trying to describe, is itself a rather exclusive discourse. It separates Others from Us, and portrays that it is up to Us, who are 'normal' and 'regular', to 'let' and 'allow' Others, who are 'problematic', 'defective' and 'abnormal', to attend mainstream schools. With such a mentality, gestures and beliefs of inclusion can easily become tokenistic, and the concern of inclusion may be limited within the superficial level of physical attendance. This points to the strong normalising value as a possible deeper cause.

Historically, norm has been measured via a statistical approach using probability theory. For example, Murray and Herrnstein (1994) proposed the bell curve theory for intelligence and argued that the norm is the mean along normal distribution. This theory has soon after been much criticised by scholars (Fischer *et al.*, 1996; Heckman, 1995; Jacoby & Glauberman, 1995) for its unsupported assumptions about intelligence, flawed statistical methods, and the fact that statistically derived norms negate the natural diversity of being. Nonetheless, such statistical approach seems to rather inform Chinese teachers' perception of norms today.

Biaozhun corresponds to the English word 'norm'. In the Chinese dictionary, it is defined as 'rules used to measure phenomena and objects'. *Biaozhun* is also frequently translated into 'standard' and 'criterion'. In the Chinese education system where standardisation of curriculum and assessment is much emphasised, not only the concept of having fixed norms can be regarded by teachers as a matter of fact, these norms are also often understood in terms of the average/mean. For example:

"There is the distinction between the normal and the abnormal. This is judged according to the average. Like, if the majority of children can do what I've asked of them, but under the same condition one or two children can't do it, then they are different from the normal others." (Xintian, English teacher, Grade Two)

> "Speaking from teaching experience, through comparison, if some children are
> obviously different from the majority of other children, or their behaviours
> and abilities are different from the average, then I consider them as the special
> children." (Geyao, Art teacher, Grade Two)

Clearly, norm as the average/mean was used by teachers to divide and label students: those who are normal if above average and those who are 'special' if below average.

Looking deeper, such a way of thinking is not without its cultural roots. For example, the Confucian classic *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*zhongyong*, in modern Chinese the word means median), as one of the Four Books of the Confucian classics, has historically been a compulsory content tested in the Imperial Examination (587-1905). It preaches that: "letting the states of equilibrium and harmony exist in perfection, a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish" (The Doctrine of the Mean, 1). Confucius highly valued amicability and the doctrine of the mean. He taught his disciples that: "perfect is the virtue which is according to the Constant Mean!" (Analects, 6.29). A state of equilibrium/harmony and the Constant Mean do not necessarily entail that the average is ideal or all should become average. But in modern days, the 'due medium' may be rather interpreted according to its word-for-word literal meaning - median. This is reflected from the numerous common sayings in use today that warn against straying far from the 'due medium', such as "the bird that sticks its neck out in a flock gets the shot", "a tall tree catches the wind that destroys it", and "fame portends trouble for men just as fattening does for pigs". Similarly, Haili said:

> "There are many contradictions and controversies in education. You can never
> make everybody happy. So one principle to bear in mind is that you must
> stand in the middle. If you stand on the left, then people on the right will
> surely find fault with you, and vice versa." (Haili, Maths teacher, on-site
> school psychologist, Grade Three)

Thus, in the Chinese culture, norms as good and desirable based on the average/mean may often be accepted as unproblematic (this is also underpinned by the collective culture in China's socialist society, which will be discussed in the next section). This mentality was found to be a key reason behind teachers' support for segregated provisions against the LRC policy. Offering specialised diagnosis, intervention, and technology in the name of meeting

the needs of those depart far from the norms is a common rationale for the establishment and prevalence of segregated schools worldwide (Bogdan & Kugelmass, 1984). For example, Kauffman (2015) argues in favour of segregated provisions for children with SEND, positing that special schools arise from individualising instruction for such children whose educational needs are considered dramatically different in many ways from other children based on the established norms. However, this paper argues against using segregated schools as a normalising technology and intends to unsettle and problematise the notion of norms, particularly in the school setting.

Norms underpins a divisive mentality, as it necessarily entails the notion of deviation and extremes which depart far from the average. This means the deviant 'abnormal' is in a relational existence with the concept of the average 'normal'. Even if the current cases of the 'abnormal' are eliminated, the next borderline cases will become the new 'abnormal'. Thus, as long as the average 'normal' are upheld as good and ideal, there will always be an underclass of deviants and extremes. This, as described by Davis (1995, 2016), is quite 'the hegemony of normalcy'. When the population was divided by norms into the 'good' majority who are 'normal' and the 'undesirable' minority who are deviants and extremes, making the deviants become the 'normal' and turning the undesirable into the 'good' under the imperative of normalisation may seem to be logical and plausible. Yet, taking to the extreme, this is also the very aim of eugenics (Galton, 1869), which, obsessed with the elimination of the 'defectives', has been associated with disasters such as racial discrimination, injustice against people with disabilities, and the holocaust.

Foucault (1977) analysed in detail how normalisation functions as a technology of disciplinary power and pervades a penal philosophy within society. Norm prescribes what is normal, good, or right. It can be constructed via human sciences – *i.e.* expert knowledge -, and makes 'dividing practices' such as differentiation and categorisation of individuals become possible (*ibid*.). This is essentially a process of subjectification and individuation, where the disciplinary power is exerted in that Norm "categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches to him his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognise and others have to recognise in him" (Foucault, 1982, 781). This normalising power applies to all individuals: the 'normal' are positioned and shaped through this subjectification as they conform to Norm and are held in check by it, whereas the 'abnormal' become punishable. In this regard, Foucault (1977, 183) wrote that the disciplinary power of normalisation

"measures in quantitative terms and hierarchises in terms of value the abilities, the level, the 'nature' of individuals.... The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalises."

To situate this in education, as Allan (1999) describes, schools are fields where this disciplinary power of Norm is applied. Upholding norms and standards in school education has routinely been considered a shared truth (Flynn, 1997; Harwood & Rasmussen, 2004; Scott, 2017). This has been expressed visibly in national targets, high stakes testing, and the league table rankings, similar to what Foucault (1977, 184) wrote: "the Normal is established as a principle of coercion in teaching with the introduction of a standardised education". Following this, school children have been increasingly made fixed educational subjects with hierarchical positions (Rausch, 2012). In particular, the 'normalising judgement' (Foucault, 1977) based on specialist knowledge – especially psychology and medicine - has produced the distinct category of children with disabilities. Not only can these children be 'punished' with the social stigma and institutional exclusion that are attached to their categorisation, their educational problems are also often medicalised, which in turn lends 'scientific justification' for their punishments. Under the gaze of the medical experts, these children may become more of medical subjects, some may even be considered as 'ineducable'. In short, the disciplinary power of Norm in education perpetuates the rhetoric of children with disabilities belonging to segregated provisions for their 'medical abnormality'. As Foucault (*ibid*., 184) described:

"In a sense, the power of normalisation impose homogeneity; but it individualises by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another."

Thus, the discourse of special needs and disability itself contains "unacceptable assumptions that legitimate and maintain existing exclusionary, discriminatory policies and practices", and the construction of 'special needs' can be a form of dominance and oppression of children who do not conform to the norms imposed by authorities (Barton, 2005, 3). Graham and Slee (2008, 281) similarly highlight, "normalisation is a man-made grid of intelligibility that attributes value to culturally specific performances and in doing so,

privileges particular ways of being". Thus, a normalising society is "a powerful and insidious form of domination" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, 198). As long as the normal and usual needs are defended as the appropriate standard, and the focus of special education is on what is different and unusual, special education can never really be a good thing (Florian, 2014).

Assimilation and Homogeneity – A Collectivistic Mentality

There were teachers who interpreted inclusion in a way that resembles assimilation and homogeneity. Further to acknowledging the physical attendance of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, teachers may also expect these children to conform to norms, who can and should be treated the same as their typically developing peers with the same standard. For example:

> "We teach all children equally the same here. Like the boy with cerebral palsy, … he won't be discriminated in this school, and he won't get specially treatments either. All students are taught the same way if they come here." (Jianguo, Maths teacher, Grade Five)

> "Inclusion means that all children receive the same education here [in the mainstream school]." (Yuefeng, school administrative staff, the CPC Youth Organisation tutor)

This one-size-fits-all understanding of inclusion cannot be separated from the strong collective culture in China, where individual differences may easily be overlooked, while similarity or even homogeneity is preferred. By believing in treating all students the same despite learner diversity, teachers may deny the additional support some children need for meaningful participation in education. 'Inclusion' becomes assimilating children with disabilities into a homogenised, collective whole. This is at best tokenistic, if not harmful.

Inclusive education in China thus means to battle with the strong collective value, as a deep-seated historical, cultural, and political personality of the Chinese nation. First, historically, China has been a single and unified civilisation state with a long, unbroken history since BCE 221. This highlights the primary, continuous concerns for generations of Chinese rulers as maintaining social order, stability, and central control (Jacques, 2012; Jiang, 2012; Zhang, 2008). Admittedly, the Chinese history is also characterised by moments of disunity, such as the evolving dynasties and the Century of Humiliation (1839-1949, China

frequently suffered from military defeats from foreign powers). Yet, the bitter consequences rather served as lessons to further reinforce the commitment to safeguarding unity, stability, and order, which, not exaggeratingly, may be valued in the Chinese culture more than anything else (*e.g.*, Deng Xiaoping's (1993) political slogan of 'stability overwhelms everything else'). In Zhang's (2008) words, the Chinese culture is characterised by an 'order complex'. The obsession with strengthening social order and central control often involves stressing that individuals need to behave conformingly to authorities or even sacrifice personal interests for 'the collective good'.

Second, culturally, collectivism has roots in Confucianism. Confucius vigorously preached harmony, as he had witnessed the chaos and conflicts of the late Warring States Period (BCE 475 - BCE 221) and lamented the cost of instability and disunity of his time. He established that the highest stage of the ideal society is a state of "great harmony" (*datong*), and maintained that "my doctrine is that of an all-pervading unity" (Analects, 4.15). An approach Confucius offered to achieve such an ideal is that of "their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy" (The Great Learning, 2). It means that serving the collective good is the ultimate purpose of individual development; all individuals should aim for the flourishing of the collective whole, *i.e.*, the family, the state, and the world, whereas individual needs, interests, and desires come second. This collective emphasis has been clearly articulated in Confucian classics: it is an evil to "harm the collective good for the sake of personal interest" (Exoteric Traditions of the Han Version of the Songs, 1, 21). This collective value of *yi tianxia wei jiren* - a common Chinese idiom which means 'taking the flourishing of the world as one's own duty' – has largely become an established truth in the Chinese culture.

Another Confucian approach to the 'great harmony' is conforming to natural orders. *Tian ren he yi* (Heaven and Man become one whole) (Dong, BCE 179 – BCE 104) and *yu tian di can* (Man in unity with Heaven and Earth) (The Doctrine of the Mean, 23) are ideal states of the 'great harmony' commonly held in Confucianism. Such thinking was relevant in the agrarian traditions in ancient China, where in order to yield abundant harvest in farming, one must obey the natural orders that were believed to be constant and unchanging: "one must follow the rules of the climate, time, water, and soil" (*ibid*.). The theorisation of this agrarian tradition in Confucianism creates a clear value emphasis that individuals should always strive to adapt and fit into the world, not only the natural but also the social, so that all can be one unity. This forms a theoretical basis for a collective culture emphasising social conformity. In

this regard, Max Weber (1968, 235) highlights that Confucianism does not "allow man an inward aspiration toward a 'unified personality (*Einheit*),' a striving which we associate with the idea of personality", because:

> "Confucianism meant adjustment to the world, to its orders and conventions… the cosmic orders of the world were considered fixed and inviolate and the orders of society were but a special case of this. … the 'happy' tranquillity of the empire and the equilibrium of the soul should and could be attained only if man fitted himself into the internally harmonious cosmos." (*ibid.*,152)

Third, politically, CPC's socialist agenda necessarily entails promoting collectivism. The State Council Information Office (2013) claims that "collectivism is the core value of Marxism; collectivism is a cultural gene of socialism. … Socialist cultural genes are the stable and inherent basic principles and spirits of the socialist culture. These principles and spirits are collectivism". Here collectivism is officially, rather misleadingly, asserted to be the core of Marxism. It is highly regarded metaphorically as the 'gene' of socialist culture. This position is popularly echoed by Chinese socialist scholars (Wang, 2010, Wang, 2016; Zhang & Wang, 2001), who similarly see collectivism as a priority principle and the core value of socialism, in a way more important than equality, fairness, and justice. Furthermore, the collectivistic imperative has been reinforced by generations of political leaders. All presidents of the People's Republic of China have continuously reiterated in official speeches the importance of promoting collectivism (Deng, 1994; Hu, 2012; Jiang, 2002; Mao, 1966; Xi, 2014), stressing that individual interests must obey collective interests and state interests. This is described by Luo (2012) as the first of the three principles of collectivism. The other two – collective interests should reflect individual interests, and collectivism values and protects the appropriate individual interests (*ibid*.) –, however, appear to be less mentioned publicly.

It now has become clear that to emphasise conformity and hierarchy, rather than collaboration and community as part of the collectivistic culture has historical, cultural, and political roots in China. Teachers' interpreting inclusion as assimilation becomes easier to understand. To illustrate further, teachers also said that segregated provisions could be sites of inclusion, as children with similar needs and abilities there together form a uniform, collective whole. This collective unit is by nature inclusive of all its members. This collectivistic focus distracts attention away from inclusion, while puts under the spotlight

individuals' ability to conform to and harmonise with their immediate social environments. For example:

> "Inclusive education can happen in both regular and special schools. Like these special children, if they come here [to the mainstream] and they can't communicate with anyone, they won't truly be a member here; whereas in special schools, everyone is similar and can be included." (Xiuqin, Maths teacher, Grade Five)

> "Children in a special school may still feel they are normal because everyone has about the same level of ability. But if they are in a mainstream school, they can feel they are very different from others, and this is not good for them." (Liangshu, Extra-curriculum activity leader)

Clearly, inclusion was understood as homogeneity. This collective emphasis was manifested in the everyday school practices. Alongside socialism and patriotism, collectivism is a key ideology that all Chinese state schools teach (Cai, 2017). *Zhengqi hua yi* (to be uniform and become one) was mentioned by teachers as a common requirement for students. Translated into practice, this means the physical space of classrooms were arranged in fixed rows and columns of desks and chairs; students were required to wear uniforms and red scarfs (A symbol for being a member in the CPC Youth Organisation. All school children are expected to join); *Kejian cao* (class break exercise, a form of easy calisthenics or stretching exercise with set routines and music. It ranges from five to 20 minutes, and is exercised once in the morning on every school day) was compulsory where all students were required to stand in orderly formation and do the same exercise in synchronisation; and at the beginning of sports days, every class was expected to march in a 'guard-of-honour' style with highly uniform movements, for which the children usually had to train for hours. Needless to say, there is a strong political agenda behind these practices to produce obedience, docile, and easily controlled citizens. The school culture of uniformity itself also presents a barrier to the inclusion of individual differences.

Although encouraging uniformity appears to be a common theme in Chinese schools today, nevertheless, the traditional Chinese culture rather specifically rejects uniformity. For example, *he shi sheng wu, tong ze bu ji* means that harmony/unity generates vitality for things to grow and develop, while sameness/uniformity only leads to stagnation (*Discourses of the*

States, BCE 947 – BCE 453). This points to that unity needs to be distinguished from uniformity. Confucius also preached unity, not uniformity. This is clear in his educational idea of *yin cai shi jiao* (accord to aptitude to teach), which, rejecting the one-size-fits-all approach of uniformity, encourages differentiated and individualised teaching and learning (Analects, 11.22). Confucius further maintained that the ultimate goal of education is for an individual to cultivate oneself and become an ideal person, or, in Confucian terms, a *Shengren* (Sage) or *Junzi* (person of superior virtues). He explained that "a *Junzi* cultivates himself so as to give peace to others" (Analects, 14.42). This highlights an approach to unity as through cultivating personal virtues to manage peaceful relationships with others, rather than simply being the same as others.

However, admittedly, revisiting ancient wisdoms alone may not be strong enough to support a fundamental change of schools' uniformity culture. Being familiar with the Confucian ideas does not necessarily mean one can feasibly apply them in practice. As Zhenting admitted:

> "We all know how the [Confucian] sayings go, but in reality, who can actually do as Confucius says? ... I've tried differentiated teaching before. It didn't work. The parents objected. For example, I gave some under-achieving students less challenging homework and different tasks, their parents would come and complain that I wasn't teaching their children equally as others. So in the end I had to teach everybody in the same way so that parents wouldn't complain." (Zhenting, head class teacher, Chinese subject teacher, Grade Four)

Thus, there is still much complexity surrounding Chinese schools' pursuit of uniformity. Other main themes arose from the data such as narrowly seeing equality as equal treatment and the dominance of medical model of disability are also key points for further investigation. These will form other papers.

Conclusion

Looking back at teachers' interpretation of inclusion as physical attendance at, it has now become clear that with a strong belief of the established norms based on the average/mean as unquestionable and good, teachers' understanding of inclusion may appear rather tokenistic. Teachers who hold normalising values may believe that first, there is a matter-of-fact

distinction between children who are 'abnormal', 'problematic', or 'defective', and the rest of the 'normal' majority; and second, the 'abnormal' children are medical subjects and belong to segregated educational provisions.

Therefore, teachers' equating physical attendance to inclusion is not just about an inadequacy in understanding. Their very perceptions of children with disabilities appear to be the results of the coercion and domination of the normalising values they believe in, which in itself are rather divisive. Simply training teachers about the enriched meaning of the inclusion concept is likely to be ineffective if deeper causes within cultural beliefs are ignored. What is needed is an official discourse shift that rather sees diversity as the norm and fosters inclusive learning communities characterised by caring and respect for individual differences. A start perhaps can be from clarifying the official policy language and definition of key concepts to avoid unhelpful confusion (*e.g.*, State Council, 2017). For individual teachers, re-visiting and re-interpreting the traditional Chinese culture such as *The Doctrine of the Mean* in modern times in relation to increasingly urgent concerns such as social equality and children's rights may also offer opportunities to draw attention to and foster new understanding of inclusion.

In addition, the analysis shows that teachers' interpretation of inclusion as assimilation and homogeneity is embedded within the common school practices of encouraging uniformity in line with the political agenda of collective ideology teaching. Deeply, this is underpinned by long-lasting historical, cultural, and political traditions. This highlights the need to seek alternative main theoretical basis for inclusion - other than using the rights-based language and individualism – so that it becomes accepted as compatible with the Chinese cultural and political contexts. This paper has in parts demonstrated how the traditional Chinese culture can underpin a statistical view of norms and coercive collectivism as well as potentially offer wisdom and strengths for developing inclusive beliefs. This signals that the traditional Chinese culture can be of great significance to the inclusion debates in China and needs further exploring, as it may offer the much-needed theoretical basis for China's inclusive education.

For inclusion to work, teachers need to believe in the inclusive values and be willingly involved. This paper invites teachers and highlights the necessity to rethink what norms and collectivism mean in today's diverse world. This can be particularly relevant in the Chinese society which is strongly characterised by these two themes. The process may involve developing a moral and humanistic rather than statistical view of norms through re-visiting and re-interpreting the traditional Chinese culture, being clear about the historical relevance of collectivistic beliefs in agrarian, industrial, or knowledge-based societies, as well as being

aware of the political implications of promoting a normalising and collectivistic education system and society. These may create the necessary intellectual space for individuals to imagine alternatives in education and in future societies. It not only concerns children with disabilities but all citizens.

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