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Further Exclusion: Standardized Testing in Chinese Inclusive Primary Schools

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Abstract: China's inclusive education, while progressive in policy discourse, is undermined in practice by a standardised assessment regime that structurally excludes students with special educational needs (SEN). This article conducts a critical analysis of how standardized assessments exacerbate the exclusion of students with SEN through policy analysis and current research, as well as through the perspective of critical disability theory. The research indicates that while policies advocate equity, standardized assessments marginalize students with SEN by emphasizing limited academic criteria, hence perpetuating stigma and epistemic injustice. The critical analysis highlights the paradox between China's inclusive commitment and standardized assessment mechanism rooted in historical *keju* tradition. In order to bridge the gap, integrate formative assessment and reconstruct teacher training programs to improve the celebration of cognitive diversity. Otherwise, without systematic shifts towards equity-driven evaluation, the advocacy of inclusive education in China would remain a utopian vision. The article underscores the necessity for meaningful and inclusive structural reforms in primary education in China.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Standardized assessment, Chinese primary school, Critical Disability Theory, Exclusion

1. Introduction

Inclusive education refers to an education system that includes all students, and welcomes and supports them to learn, whoever they are and whatever their abilities or requirements[1]. Inclusive education in China has shown a booming trend, but there has always been a paradox in this system regarding the inclusion issue of students with special educational needs (SEN). In other words, although students with SEN benefit from inclusive education to some extent, in fact, some hidden mechanisms further exclude them[1]. The *Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities* (2017 edition) stipulates that schools should not refuse to admit students with SEN, requiring that "disabled persons who meet the conditions stipulated by laws and regulations shall not be refused admission" [2], marking great progress in inclusive education in China. Recently, the *"14th Five-Year Plan" Special Education Development and Enhancement Action Plan* issued in 2022 proposes to give priority to the development of inclusive education, and plans to achieve a compulsory education enrollment rate of 97% for school-age children with disabilities by 2025 [3]. However, there is evidence that regular primary schools in China have always excluded students with SEN[4][5]. Xu et

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al.[1] pointed out that many students with SEN are only physically involved in regular classrooms without being included in educational activities in meaningful ways. The discrepancy between policy initiatives and actual educational practice is actually that the superficially inclusive political reforms are undermined by structural mechanisms, particularly the standardized testing system.

This paper argues that standardized assessment in Chinese primary schools promotes the exacerbating effect of the hidden curriculum on exclusion. While many studies have examined factors that cause and exacerbate exclusion, such as differences in resource allocation and teachers' attitudes [6][7], few studies have questioned the role of assessment regimes in perpetuating exclusion, at least in China. In the context of exam-oriented education in China [8], this gap is even more pronounced, with students with SEN marginalized through both overt and hidden mechanisms.

This critical analysis will analyze this discrepancy from the perspective of critical disability theory. This theory challenges the dominant view of the medical model and emphasizes re-examining and criticizing traditional concepts of disability from social, political and cultural perspectives. This review aims to uncover how recent policy advocacy has reshaped and strengthened the exclusion of standardized assessment systems. This paper calls for challenging the underlying educational structures that affect the development of inclusive education and rethinking assessment practices in pursuit of true inclusion.

2. Literature review

2.1. Critical Disability Theory

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) is a new framework for analyzing disability, which aims to re-examine the concept of disability from the perspective of cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon[9]. In the past, the medical model has been dominant in the education and rehabilitation strategies of disabled individuals, emphasizing that disability itself is a problem that needs to be repaired and solved [10]. It may lead to the stigmatization of disability, which is reflected in the fact that many Chinese parents of autistic children are reluctant to report their children's autism diagnosis [11]. However, more and more scholars realize that the issue of disability is not just a medical or biological issue, but also an issue involving power, inequality, and social justice [12]. Therefore, scholars have turned their attention to how society constructs and perpetuates discrimination and prejudice against disabled people.

CDT uses Critical Realism stratified ontology as its theoretical foundation, emphasizing that social and cultural factors, including unfair policies, stereotypes and superstitions, greatly affect the social participation and quality of life of disabled people [10]. CDT calls for fundamental reforms to these social construction issues to promote true inclusion and equality. This study will adopt this perspective to critically analyze how standardized assessment further excludes students with SEN.

2.2. Inclusive education in Chinese primary schools

There is a gap between China's implementation of inclusive education and international initiatives on inclusive education. According to UNESCO [13] "inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems and other learning environments in order to respond to the diversity of learners", instead of being a peripheral concern regarding the inclusion of certain learners in mainstream education. In the 1980s, in response to inclusive education, China launched the strategy 'Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC)' *(sui ban jiu du)*, which aims to encourage mainstream schools to enrol students with SEN and guarantee their right to compulsory education [14]. Although this marks the progress of inclusive education in China, it has also been criticized by scholars. Deng and Poon-McBrayer [15] criticized the dual flaws of this initiative at the political and practical levels, namely the conflict and huge gap between policy and practice. Such limitations result in students with

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SEN physically sitting in regular classrooms with their typically developing (TD) peers, without having their additional support needs addressed and participating in school activities in a meaningful way [1].

2.3. Analysis standardized assessment

China's education system emphasizes standardized testing as the main means of evaluating student performance and determining the teaching process. This exam-oriented method has deep historical roots in China that can be traced to the *keju* (civil service examinations) which were popular in the Sui and Tang dynasties. Designed to select talented individuals for government service, these examinations reflected the ideals of strengthening elite rule [16]. While the modern system has evolved to nowadays, the *keju* tradition and the values reflected in it still influence China's contemporary educational practices [17].

Additionally, China's exam-oriented education system has further marginalized this group in inclusive education settings. This education system emphasizes that academic performance determines the qualifications for entry into secondary school and university. However, many studies have shown that students with SEN generally show poor academic performance [18][19][20]. In addition, standardized assessment may further deepen the anxiety and depression of these students, partly due to their lack of adaptation to the examination format and long-term negative feedback [21]. This means that traditional standardized assessment may not be suitable for assessing the true academic ability of students with SEN. Moreover, standardized assessment has long been criticized for not accurately reflecting students' holistic abilities, which is contrary to the claim of inclusive education that educational quality should take diversity into account [13].

For a variety of reasons, students with SEN are sometimes excluded from the standardised testing system. This is despite China's education policy commitment to providing equal opportunities for all students [2] and providing financial subsidies to inclusive teachers to encourage them to enrol students with SEN in regular classrooms [22]. However, the academic performance of students with SEN may have a negative impact on the reputation and ranking of schools, and the academic performance of students with SEN is often not taken into account when evaluating school performance [23][24]. However, this makes it seem like helping students with SEN do well in school is not a top priority. As a result, teachers focus more on helping neurotypical students do well in school, leaving students with SEN out in the cold and making inequality worse.

3. Critical Analysis and Discussion

Standardized assessments in China have long been the dominant measure of academic achievement, but they foster a narrow definition of success and neglect individual differences. This one-sided focus tends to marginalize students whose strengths are not in academic aspects, such as autistic students. Autistic individuals often exhibit unique cognitive abilities and ways of perceiving the world [25]. For example, some autistic people show extra attention to details or non-traditional problem-solving methods [26]. Nevertheless, these contents are often ignored by standardized assessments designed for neurotypical students [27].

In China's inclusive schools, the inconsistency between the advocacy of equality and the reality of exclusion is very obvious. While the *Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities* [2] and *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China*(2018 edition)[28] emphasize equal opportunities, the prevalence of standardized testing simultaneously reinforces the social exclusion of people with disabilities. These tests implicitly convey the view that success is equivalent to excellent academic performance, thereby excluding students with SEN who do not fit this model. These practices reflect a medical model of disability that views disabilities as problems to be solved

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or shameful [10]. This practice perpetuates inequality and inclusive education that celebrates and embraces diversity remains unrealized.

CDT provides a critical perspective for criticizing standardized assessment. It argues that what hinders inclusion is not individuals' disabilities, but social structures that fail to embrace and celebrate diversity. From this perspective, China's exam-oriented education system can be seen as an epistemic injustice against students with SEN [29]. Students with SEN are excluded from the education assessment system because their voices and knowledge are not considered credible. The education system only values forms of learning that are consistent with mainstream expectations, which maintains this unequal power structure that serves neurotypical students, especially the elite.

4. Suggestions

In response to the above unfair phenomenon, education policy and practice need to be reformed to create an assessment system that can identify and recognize different cognitive characteristics. Policymakers should consider integrating alternative assessment methods such as formative assessment (FA) that provide a more holistic picture of students' capabilities. FA is an ongoing process for assessing student learning through the teaching process, not only at the end of instruction [30]. It involves multiple methods such as quizzes, observations, class discussions and continuous feedback that enable teachers to monitor students' progress and adjust teaching methods accordingly. The main purpose of FA is to identify aspects that students are struggling with, thereby guiding the change of teaching practices and improving student learning [31]. According to Florian and Beaton[32], this method recognizes that all students have unique learning needs and differences, thus fosters a supportive and inclusive learning environment and enhancing the overall educational experiences. However, when conducting the FA, educational practitioners should avoid marginalization that can occur when differentiation is overly focused on individual needs.

Additionally, teacher training needs to be reformed. Although previous research highlights that teachers in regular schools have insufficient understanding of students with SEN, it is advocated to include relevant knowledge in teacher training [33][1]. However, this initiative seems to assume that as long as teachers have sufficient knowledge about SEN, they can ensure inclusive education and avoid exclusion. This approach may lead to a repetition of exclusion [34], where teachers are aware of the disabilities and cognitive differences of these students and see them as issues that need to be addressed. Students with SEN will be differentiated in teaching and excluded from the assessment system. This undoubtedly reinforces the medical model's perspective that disability is a stigma that needs to be eliminated. New teacher training needs to be changed according to the concept of CDT, incorporating strategies to identify and cultivate the unique advantages of students with SEN, and truly embrace and celebrate diversity in the instructional process. These reforms will break the illusion of inclusive education in China's current initiatives to support all learners and true equity and equality.

5. Conclusion

China's standardised testing regime, deeply rooted in historical and cultural traditions perpetuates systemic exclusion of students with SEN despite the improvement of inclusive education political advocacy. By prioritising the academic development of neurotypical students, these assessments reinforce structural ableism, marginalising students with SEN through overt (e.g., exclusion from the current assessment system) and hidden (e.g., stigma) mechanisms. CDT reveals how these approaches reflect the dominant position of the medical model of disability, viewing differences as deficits rather than embracing diversity, influencing the inclusive practices in Chinese primary schools.

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In order to eliminate the exclusionary structures, reforms should integrate FA that recognise different cognitive characters and strengths of students with SEN, and redesign teacher training programmes to challenge the outdated assumption of disability. Authentic inclusion needs systematic transformation, replacing homogenised standardized testing with equity-driven framework that values the potential of all learners. This study possesses many potential limitations that must be mentioned. The findings of this study may apply solely to the Chinese educational context or countries with a similar educational framework as China.

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