Managing Special Needs Provision in China: a qualitative comparison of special needs provision in the Shaanxi region of China and England

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Introduction: traditional Chinese education and special needs

Like the other articles in this issue, this paper focuses on the management of a particular aspect of education in China, in this case provision for children with special educational needs (SEN). The first part of the paper considers some general background issues in the area, while the second part consists of data gathered through observation in schools, interviews with school managers and teachers and discussions between Chinese and British academic colleagues. The management structure of special schools is the same as that of mainstream schools, and the issues concerning institutional management are very similar. Since these issues are covered in the other articles, the main focus of the first part will be on the management of SEN provision at the level of the system, where there are important differences between mainstream and special provision.

The traditional values of the Chinese educational system have meant that children with special educational needs have not been seen as a priority and in many cases have not been recognised as being the responsibility of the system at all. For centuries, there was a strong emphasis on achievement, with only the most able being given any sort of formal education (Ashman, 1995). The system was therefore extremely hierarchical, with a deliberate emphasis on tradition which made any form of change in management very difficult and which offered no education at all to those with even very mild special needs (Gardner, 1989). Where provision was made, it tended to be provided by local charities in a rather haphazard way, combining education with care, and therefore following a similar pattern to that in western countries (Wedell, 1990; Foreman & Pervova, 1996).

Although the Cultural Revolution obviously brought many significant changes, some of the previous ideas about education survived, in particular the view that the purpose of education is to serve the good of society at large, rather than to encourage individual development and promote individual rights (Teng Teng, 1994). This has major implications for special education because it has resulted in a general management policy that scarce educational resources should go as a priority to people and institutions who are likely to offer most to society, rather than to those whose needs are greatest.

Since the death of Mao, this view has not been without its critics: Yang Dongping
(1990), for example, attacked the elitist assumptions of the system and proposed a more pragmatic approach which would recognise individual needs and growth. However, change is taking place only slowly, and it is still the case that access not only to post-compulsory education but also to the better schools and colleges is still based on highly competitive examinations which deny access to almost all those with special needs (Potts, 1989).

The educational system obviously reflects more general attitudes towards disability, and at the level of the family, a disabled child has traditionally been seen as bringing loss of face. Potts (1989) suggests a range of reasons for this, including:

the economic hardship that often followed from having a disabled person in your family, the custom that your sons would look after you in your old age, the intolerance of differences in appearance and behaviour, and the more recent pressure to conform to ideal types, such as 'model worker' or 'model teacher'. People with disabilities were un-ideal types. (Potts, 1989, p. 169). 

Given such established social attitudes and the traditional Chinese educational system that both reflects and promotes them, we can now turn to a consideration of the management of special needs provision within that system.

The Management of Special Needs Provision within the Education System

The interests of special education are represented at all three main levels of management—national, provincial and county or city—with parallel organisation at each level:

(1) State Education Commission—Section of Special Education
(2) Provincial Education Commission—Office of Special Education
(3) City, or Municipal District, Education Committee—Section of Special Education

At each level, although there is a specific body responsible for the management of special education, it always comes under the control of the department or committee responsible for general education, and does not seem to have direct access to the senior management committee at that level.

The management of special education is also affected by two other bodies which do not affect mainstream provision: the state welfare system and the Chinese Disabled Persons' Federation.

The welfare system is involved mainly because of the tradition of care briefly mentioned above. The education system shares much of its responsibility for disabled children with the welfare system, which has a parallel managerial organisation at national, provincial and local levels. Although the responsibilities of the education and welfare systems are officially distinct, data from our interviews suggest that there can sometimes be complex overlaps and occasional unwillingness to take on financial or other responsibilities in practice.

The Chinese Disabled Persons' Federation acts as a unique and often effective pressure group in the interests of disabled adults and children. Like many such groups throughout the world, it owes its existence largely to the efforts of a single powerful person with a strong vested interest—in this case Deng Pufang, son of the late Deng Xiaoping and himself a wheelchair user after having his back broken by Red Guards in 1968. He was mainly responsible for setting up the Federation in 1988 and, though he is well aware that it implies a western emphasis on individuality, he strongly promotes 'humanitarian education' (Potts, 1989). He calls regularly for a change in attitudes
towards the disabled since, without it, policy decisions and even legislation remain largely ineffective. For instance, interviews with head teachers of two special schools revealed that local branches of the Federation organise activities such as arts festivals to promote the achievements of disabled students and bring them to the attention of the public. It should be noted, however, that although this body has undoubtedly affected policy in the past, it has no formal status in the management system and acts through influence rather than through any official role. With the death of Deng Xiaoping, this influence may therefore decline in the future.

The Special School System

So far, we have looked briefly at the background, organisation and management of special education within the national system. We can now turn to look more closely at how special educational provision is itself organised. In terms of management at school level, special schools have exactly the same management structure as mainstream schools, including a principal, one or more vice principals and a Party secretary. This management structure is discussed in more detail in other articles and so will not be considered here, but the overall organisation of the special school system is worth considering in some detail.

The Category System

At national level, the Chinese have developed a group of categories similar in many ways to those used in Britain before they were abolished in the 1981 Education Act. Xu Yun (1992) describes the Chinese categories as:

- visually impaired (defined in terms of actual visual acuity rather than educational need);
- hearing and speech disabled (defined in part in terms of actual auditory loss, though also linked to resultant speech difficulties);
- mentally disabled (defined in terms of IQ and maladapted behaviour);
- physical disabled (defined by means of a specified range of conditions such as spinal injury or congenital malformation);
- emotionally disabled (having suffered from mental disease for over a year); and
- multiple-disabled (two or more of the above).

An approach like this, in which children are assessed and then allocated to a particular category, clearly supports a structure for managing special needs provision through special institutions separated from the rest of the system. The whole rationale is based on a medical model in which the problem is seen as being a 'within child' defect, as opposed to the more recent model in Britain of the child's needs being seen in the context of the learning situation and at least partly as a result of it (e.g. Lund, 1996).

Incidence

The officially recognised incidence of special educational needs also allows a comparison to be made with Great Britain, and the management implications are again interesting. In theory, it would be possible for almost any figure to be officially chosen as the cut-off point beyond which the system is willing to make special provision, and it is clear that in practice, apparent incidence is often decided by available provision.
In Britain before the 1981 Act, just under 2% of all children were officially regarded as not able to be catered for in the mainstream system, and the number of children seen as requiring the protection of an official statement reached around 3%, according to the 1994 Audit Commission report. Although the Chinese category system is quite different in many ways from the one traditionally used in Britain, Xu Yun (1992), using the latest available Chinese figures, calculated the percentage of disabled children at 2.66%, giving an official cut-off point quite close to the British one. However, it should be noted that this figure represents the proportion of children seen as not able to be educated within the mainstream system, rather than those for whom special school places are actually available, and Xu Yun recognises that no provision at all is made for some of them. This was also openly admitted by almost all the Chinese heads, teachers and academics we interviewed, though few were prepared to give even an approximate figure for the percentage of children not catered for. We were told that this was partly because of large differences between urban and rural areas, and partly because of the problems in collecting such information, particularly in the countryside.

Priorities and Provision for Different Categories

Within the spectrum of disabilities, it is also clear those in charge of managing the system have had to make some decisions about priorities, especially given the comparative lack of resources. In most western countries, the earliest forms of special school provision to emerge historically have almost always been special schools for the deaf and blind, followed only later by schools for those with severe learning difficulties or emotional and behaviour problems. (Foreman & Pervova, 1996). This historical trend, which may be partly a result of the 'visibility' and public perceptions of each type of disability, has also been reflected in China, so that, for example, there is very little special school provision for children with emotional and behaviour difficulties (Xu Yun, 1992). This is also reflected in the data discussed in more detail in the section beginning p. 212, since the only special schools visited and discussed were for deaf or blind children.

Xu Yun also notes that 'mentally retarded' children make up almost two-thirds of the total disabled child population, in contrast to about 2% and 14% for visual and hearing impaired, respectively. These proportions are certainly not matched by the numbers of special schools in the official figures given by the National Education Committee and Disabled Federation (1994): number of schools for the blind, 22 schools; the deaf, 729; deaf and blind, 120; and mentally retarded, 370.

In spite of the much greater recognised incidence of mental retardation, there has therefore been a management decision to make many more special school places available for sensory impairment than for severe learning difficulties. Such a decision can be related to the underlying notion mentioned in the introduction, that the purpose of education is primarily to serve society. Provision presumably reflects the view that those with severe learning difficulties are much less likely to be able to contribute anything of value, and may therefore simply be left at home. This trend is likely to continue since similar proportions are reflected in the current number of teacher training places available for those who wish to teach children with learning difficulties (Ashman, 1995).

Similarly, the China Disabled Persons' Federation's five-year plan, set up in 1988, listed its priorities as cataracts, hearing impairment and polio because these are the most commonly occurring problems which can be treated relatively cheaply by mobile
medical teams, and those suffering from them are thus the most likely to become useful citizens. Although this may seem to western eyes to be making unacceptable distinctions between individuals, there are disturbing parallels with some of the problematic decisions currently facing British health service managers, and such pragmatism is in harmony not only with Chinese social philosophy, but also with the most effective management of scarce resources.

**Special Needs Provision in Mainstream Schools**

*Integration and Special Classes*

In British schools, especially since the 1981 Education Act, there has been a strong movement to promote the integration of children with special needs into mainstream schools as far as possible. Thus the 1994 Code of Practice sets out in detail how every mainstream school must have a detailed management policy for its special needs provision and a special needs coordinator to ensure that the policy is carried out. In contrast, in China the emphasis on defining special needs in terms of official categories to be managed within a separate special education system means that there is little deliberate integration of children with special needs into mainstream schools.

However, an intermediate form of organisation in Britain is to have special classes or units attached to mainstream schools, and this solution is also sometimes used in China, though success does depend a lot on supportive management. At their best, if flexibly managed to allow maximum integration, special units and classes can provide an ideal mix of mainstream contact and special resources. On the other hand, if unsympathetically managed, they run the risk of being isolated from the rest of the school and less well resourced than larger special schools which can enjoy economies of size. Moreover, if small units are replicated in several neighbouring schools, they may not be sensible in terms of financial management.

The National Education Committee and Disabled Federation figures for special classes within mainstream schools in China in 1994 for the three main categories are given in Table I.

**Children with SEN in Mainstream Classes**

In Britain, it is generally accepted that at any one time, about one child in five will have needs requiring some sort of differentiated provision, with the obvious implication that most children with special needs are therefore being educated in normal classes. In mainstream schools in China, there is generally less emphasis on differentiation and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. of special classes</th>
<th>No. of pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blind</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>4412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentally retarded</td>
<td>3726</td>
<td>110,135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: The National Education Committee and Disabled Federation (1994).*
more effort is made to keep the whole class at the same level. However, our interview
data confirm that some children are unable to keep up, particularly as they grow older
and curriculum demands increase, and they present particular management problems to
mainstream schools.

For many years, one common management response has simply been to make children
who fail the annual exams repeat the year—a solution long employed by European
countries which have a relatively rigid curriculum set out year by year (Merry, 1991).
This method has been particularly common in China because of the competition between
schools to be designated as ‘model’ schools because of their results, especially since
such a designation brings extra resources. Repeaters not only enable the curriculum to
remain the same, but are also therefore a good way for those who manage schools to
avoid the problem of children with learning difficulties lowering the school’s examina-
tion performance figures (Jing Lin, 1993), a problem now faced in Britain too as a result
of Local Management of Schools and league tables. In rural schools, Jing Lin notes that
this can lead to high levels of drop-out among older, disillusioned pupils who have
repeated several years, adding further to the numbers of those receiving no formal
education. Such an approach clearly ignores factors such as self-esteem or loss of face
and the vital social contexts of learning, and it is significant that there has recently been
growing opposition to its use except in the final year of secondary education, to allow
school leavers to try to improve their grades.

Another solution for managing the provision for children with a wide range of
abilities, including those with special needs, is to use a ‘tracking’ or streaming system.
In most western countries, a year intake of 60 children would mean two classes in each
year group, with at least the possibility of streaming, but in China the management
decision has been to have much larger classes with teachers working fewer hours.
Classes of 60 children are quite common, so that streaming is possible only in the bigger
urban schools serving densely populated areas and with large numbers of children in the
same year group.

Both ways of managing special needs provision in mainstream, while understandable
in their context, do also tend to ignore the important social and emotional factors of
learning which are increasingly being emphasised in the west (e.g. Pollard & Filer,
1995).

**Special Education in Shaanxi Province**

The first part of this paper has described some of the major themes in special needs
 provision and its management in China. The second part is based on case study
observations, interviews and questionnaire data collected by University of Leicester
School of Education staff in conjunction with academic staff from Shaanxi Teachers’
University, mainly during April and May 1996. For this paper, data were collected from
six schools deliberately chosen to cover a wide range:

1. a model special 'school for deaf-mutes' in the city of Xi'an;
2. a similar model special school for blind and deaf-mutes;
3. a small rural primary school with a part-time special class;
4. a large urban primary school with a full-time special class;
5. a small rural junior secondary school with a part-time special class; and
6. a large urban junior secondary school with a part-time special class.

It is important to recognise that, given the enormous size of the country, there are major
differences between different areas of China, so that observations made in one province may not reflect any national pattern. There are also important differences within provinces, especially between urban and rural schools (Jing Lin, 1993). Bearing these differences in mind, rather than presenting very brief case studies of each individual school, the rest of this article will use the case study and other data to illustrate some major themes and issues, including some of those raised in the first part of this article.

The Social Function of Education

One major point to emerge so far has been the importance of education's social role in China, with the emphasis on producing good citizens. Though this may be a laudable aim, given a shortage of resources, it can result in difficult decisions having to be made by those who manage schools, and can have serious effects for individuals who are not seen as having much social potential, or who will need extra resources to realise that potential. This is evident in several ways in the case study data.

Selection of Pupils—There is certainly strong competition for places at the two prestigious model special schools, and parents are expected to pay towards the costs. Interviews with senior management teams in both schools also highlight a major difference between the two countries in terms of management decisions about the selection of pupils. Competition for scarce resources in Britain usually means that those individuals who are most in need get priority, so that, for example, only those with serious learning difficulties get the protection of a statement to guarantee them the necessary resources. In China exactly the opposite may be true. Staff at both the special schools for the deaf described quite rigorous assessment procedures designed to select not those children who needed most help but those who were most likely to be able to be integrated into society eventually, so that assessment included not only hearing tests but also IQ residual language and self-confidence. In one school, only 20 children out of the 60 who had applied were admitted. The school is judged partly on successful rehabilitation, and claimed that 90% of their hearing-impaired children were able to transfer to mainstream primary schools by the age of 7. In terms of the effective management of resources, this is an impressive figure, and the school managers knew that such good results would help them to maintain their ‘model’ school status and thus continue to bring in more resources.

Social and Moral Education—With regard to class management, one common observation in all the schools visited was how well-behaved the children were. Children in the model special schools were well used to visitors from all over the world, but those in the two village schools had seen very few western people. Yet they continued quietly with their work and there was virtually none of the staring and giggling that might have occurred in many British schools! When we asked about this, the most common explanation in all the schools was the importance placed on ‘moral education’ in the curriculum. The official handbook of one of the special schools said:

Over the past 10 years, the school has always insisted on its purpose of putting moral education in the first place, centring around teaching and learning ensuring the improvement of the students’ qualities as the fundamental good.

Further discussion with teachers revealed that moral education includes strong elements of good social behaviour as well as ‘political correctness’, and the questionnaire data
also revealed that teachers too are assessed not only on their knowledge and teaching skills but also on their political awareness. The social and political roles of education therefore seem strongly linked and were very much in evidence in the special schools as well as the mainstream system. Equally significantly for many children with special needs, social skills are seen as an important part of the national curriculum, allowing Chinese teachers to give training in such skills quite legitimately. In contrast, the National Curriculum for England and Wales is restricted to academic subjects and was drawn up initially with little input from those concerned with special education. The teaching of basic self-help and social skills, so important for many children with special needs, therefore had to be done outside the National Curriculum. Attempts made recently to solve the apparent moral decline in society by adding a moral education programme to an overcrowded academic curriculum may thus seem a little belated to say the least.

Vocational Education—Another way in which the social function of education was apparent in China was in the strong vocational elements observed in most of the schools. Both special schools had vocational classes for the older pupils, including technical drawing and a small-scale clothes factory for the hearing-impaired students and training in massage for the blind. This provision is not only to prepare students to become useful citizens, but also where possible, to contribute to the school funds. However, vocational education is not part of the curriculum only for older students. The large urban primary school has a small factory and the small rural school has an apple orchard in which all the children, including those in the special class, are expected to work, again partly to raise funds and partly to develop the concept of labour, itself an important aim of Chinese education (see the 'Curriculum and Teaching Methods' section below).

Links with Home

Residential Provision—In all schools, staff said they valued and promoted links with parents, usually through a parents' committee. Because of the sheer size of the country and because the two special schools served very big catchment areas, they were both partly residential, but the dormitories looked very bare and spartan, with little space for personal possessions and little encouragement to make the space more personal with pictures, etc. Some children are able to go home at weekends, while others are full-time boarders, depending not so much on the severity of their condition, as it might in Britain, but on the difficulty of public transport between home and school.

Parents and Finance—In mainstream schools, financial management arrangements mean that local or national government pay for the textbooks, the school provides the teachers' materials and parents pay for their child's learning resources. In both special schools, however, parents are expected to pay for textbooks and other reading materials, and since they are in effect competing with each other for scarce places, they must often have to make considerable sacrifices. Several teachers openly commented that one reason why many children with disabilities are not able to have any formal education, especially in the rural areas, was that their families simply could not afford to send them to an appropriate school. One head estimated that only about 15% of children with learning difficulties would attend school. As elsewhere, such decisions cannot be judged in isolation, no matter how distasteful they appear to western educationalists, but need to be seen in the context of the management of the whole system and its resources as well as the result of long-established attitudes.
SEN Provision in Mainstream Schools

Attitudes and Integration—In the first part of this paper, we noted how for the last 15 years, integration has been a key concept guiding the management of special needs provision in Britain, and the whole system now runs on the basis that children with special needs should as far as possible be educated alongside their peers. In contrast, it was very clear from all the data collected in China that there is still comparatively little deliberate integration and that those with special needs are seen in terms of a deficit model, or at least are perceived as being qualitatively different. Some of the very terms used, such as the ‘feeble-minded class’ and ‘deformed activity days’ seem very blunt to western ears and imply negative attitudes, though of course something may be lost in the translation. Interestingly, both special schools were named as catering for ‘deaf-mutes’ even though the selection procedures means that children with serious language problems as well as hearing loss have no chance of being admitted. When questioned about this, staff laughed and explained that it was an old-fashioned term, seeming unconcerned that such a label might not be in their children’s best interests. Conversely, teachers in the special schools did recognise that public attitudes are a major problem, and felt that the best way to gain acceptance was to teach their pupils to be useful citizens.

SEN in Mainstream Classes—In interviews, teachers and managers in mainstream schools acknowledged that some children would find it difficult to keep up, and when we asked about how provision for them was managed, the response followed a very similar pattern, with three main management strategies being described:

- Firstly, it was obvious in the mainstream schools that many classes contained some children who were considerably older than most of the others, and repeating a year did still seem to be a very common way of dealing with children with mild or moderate learning difficulties, as discussed earlier. We saw no evidence of these children being treated differently, though it does seem likely that there must be some loss of face involved.
- We were told that such children and others who are unable to keep up were given extra lessons by their normal teacher in a part-time special class held after school once or twice a week, made easier because Chinese teachers tend to have less contact time than their British counterparts. Some of the content appeared to be the same as the work the rest had been covering, taught more slowly and with more practical experience, while other work concentrates more on the social and personal skills mentioned already as an important and integral part of the curriculum.
- The other strategy described was the use of peer-tutoring, including group work, though none of this was actually observed, possibly because the teachers felt that they should be seen to be firmly in charge when their classes are being visited.

Special Classes in Mainstream Schools—The large urban primary school, which had a total of 2300 children plus 400 in the pre-school section, is quite unusual, not because of its size but because of its full-time special class for children with learning difficulties. There were five boys and seven girls in the class. Although it is a primary school, their ages ranged from 8 to 17 because those judged as least able in fact stay on until they are old enough to leave school entirely. It is seen as pointless to send them on to secondary school if they are unable to cope with the primary curriculum. Most of them obviously had severe learning difficulties including Down’s syndrome, and several also had physical disabilities. The children in this group, although officially attending the
same school as the other children, in fact followed an entirely separate curriculum with
their own teacher and did not mix with the others even at an event like sports day, when
it would have been very easy to integrate them.

Curriculum and Teaching Methods
Whenever we asked about curriculum content, in both mainstream and special schools
we received a standard answer, usually mentioning the five established areas—moral,
intellectual, health and physical, aesthetics and the concept of labour. In the special
schools, the aims of the teachers differed according to the disabilities of their children.
One teacher of the deaf stated her main aim as rehabilitation, and therefore emphasised
Chinese language teaching to encourage maximum communication with others, while
her colleague who taught children with severe learning difficulties felt that her pupils
would never be fully accepted in society and used individual teaching to try to get them
to be more responsible for themselves. As the earlier sections suggested, the aims and
content of teaching could thus be seen as related not simply to individual needs but also
to public attitudes and to the likely social contribution the children would be able to
make.

In general, class management and teaching methods were as we had expected, with the
teacher instructing the whole class from the front, and an emphasis on performance in
the form of drills or choral speaking. However, it is perhaps too easy to dismiss these
methods as leading only to shallow learning without real understanding, and they may
be highly motivating for some children with learning difficulties who can join in with
the rest and produce similar results to their peers. Certainly, the children observed were
very keen to recite the ‘lessons’ and sing the songs which they had learned by heart.

At no time did we see any form of differentiation, but discussions with teachers
suggested that, as elsewhere, we should not immediately assume a lack of interest in
individual progress. For a start, mainstream classes were much bigger than in the west,
with 50 children being quite common. Second, trying to keep the whole class together
is a deliberate policy clearly in keeping with an emphasis on the collective good, and
could be seen as a different approach to helping as many individuals as possible to learn
alongside their peers (Reynolds, 1996).

Two examples were particularly interesting in this respect, both observed in one of the
special schools. In one lesson, the whole class of 12 deaf primary age children performed
a PE drill, following the example of one of the older pupils. There was absolutely no free
expression, but the quality of the movement was better than anything the first author has
observed in British primary schools, and the pride of the children was obvious. Similarly,
a class of 16 and 17 year-olds were producing some superb art work in the form of
traditional pictures, and it was only after observing them for a few minutes that it
became obvious that the original drawings had been traced. The first reaction of a
western visitor might be to dismiss this as an exercise of limited value, but two points
might be made. The first is that the results were again excellent, and the pride of the
students obvious. Secondly, it might also be the case that the students were actually
learning very useful drawing skills, especially since the pictures were exactly the same
as other traditional paintings being sold to tourists elsewhere!

Some interesting teaching techniques were also observed, using whole-class teaching
but also involving the children actively. There were many examples of children being
called out to the front to perform, sometimes individually but sometimes to compete
publicly with each other. Again, the first reaction of a western observer might be
disapproval at any competitiveness, especially in one case where one child was clearly much slower than the other and simply copied the other child's response a moment later. However, it is still possible that this child was learning something by having the correct answer modelled for him in a form of peer tutoring, and there certainly appeared to be no amusement at his expense. It is also possible that Chinese teachers are rather more aware of western class management and teaching methods than we tend to recognise. To some extent, methods are constrained by the use of standard textbooks in ordinary schools, but some mainstream teachers said that it was mainly the large classes and lack of resources that prevented them from managing their classes differently and doing more groupwork, for example.

**Conclusion**

On the whole, therefore, the case study data tend to illustrate both similarities and differences between the two countries. At the deepest level, although the emphasis is very different, there is some tension in both countries as to whether the educational system should be managed to produce maximum conformity or to encourage individual diversity. In Britain, a long child-centred tradition of emphasising individual needs has been reinforced by the SEN code of practice, but implicitly challenged by the National Curriculum and its public assessment. In China, this tension is perhaps less problematic in mainstream, and more apparent in special schools, where individual needs may be very visible and obvious, and where individual children have been deliberately selected for special provision.

The problem was explicitly recognised by school managers we talked to, and there was a general recognition of the conflict between the pressure to raise general standards through a fixed curriculum on the one hand and their desire to meet individual needs on the other.

Similarly, although Chinese attitudes to the disabled have been traditionally harsher than British ones, both countries are recognising the importance of improving such attitudes through education. Though operating at different levels, the increasingly strong effects of the market economy in both educational systems are resulting in school managers seeing themselves in competition with each other for scarce resources. In turn, greater competition between schools could have important effects on management decisions about accepting children with special needs if such children are seen as taking up extra resources and lowering the school’s average scores in the public examination scores by which schools are increasingly judged in both countries.

However, observations must be seen in the context of views about special needs education which are very different from those in Britain. For instance, we have noted how most of the 20% of British children regarded as having special needs are educated in mainstream, while in China those defined as having special needs are seen as a smaller separate minority who in many cases cannot be educated at all. A similar point is made by Yu Yan Mao (1993) about early intervention, which has been recognised as vital in meeting special needs in the west for many years, in rhetoric if not always in practice, but which has not been seen as a priority in China.

Differences in the management of special education are based on fundamentally different perceptions, and it is simplistic to assume that one country is somehow merely ‘behind’ the other. Ashman (1995), for example, notes that some areas of Chinese provision may need to pass through an evolutionary process similar to the one which has occurred in the west, but that in other areas, cultural differences are so great that it would
be impossible to transplant western solutions into the Chinese system. As educationalists from such very different cultures, we can both learn from each other.

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