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The implementation of inclusive education in Beijing: exorcizing the haunting specter of meritocracy

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BOOK REVIEW

The implementation of inclusive education in Beijing: exorcizing the haunting specter of meritocracy, by Kai Yu, Plymouth, Lexington Books, 2014, 165 pp., £48.67 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-7391-4698-9

The Implementation of Inclusive Education in Beijing: Exorcizing the Haunting Specter of Meritocracy is one of a series of 11 books that concern *Emerging perspectives on Education in China*, edited by G. Postiglione. This series focuses on the cultural and historical perspectives specific to Chinese culture and how this is transmitted through the educational system.

Kai Yu is the sole author of the book under review, and his research centres on the issues of inclusion within the capital city of Beijing. He discerns there is a gap between China's meritocracy and government policies regarding inclusive education in the city. Yu argues that inclusive pedagogy is an elusive concept for many educators in this country, and this is because of the interactions between the cultural historical development of the education system, its recent policies and rapid growth. A particular challenge for Chinese school principals, for instance, is in understanding their role in implementing the inclusive education policy. Yu shows that this aspect of leadership is heavily influenced by the values and the belief systems of teachers at the ground level, which affects the choice of learning activities and teachers' interactions with their students. In addition, organizational and institutional factors presented within schools are shown to complicate the development of inclusive practices. Furthermore, Yu shows that teachers' personal experiences may either facilitate or inhibit how the current inclusion policy is implemented in the classrooms.

As one of the few books to come out of China that comments extensively on the development of inclusive practices in the capital city, it is a primary reader for those who are interested in the development of inclusive education in this vast country. The book has a definite appeal to an international audience. It touches on the practical issues faced by educators when implementing inclusive education in China, and how government policy and leadership styles can influence teachers' practice and pedagogy. Trends noted in pedagogy and practice in Beijing, therefore, are likely to permeate the rest of the country. Yu's contribution to the general knowledge base of inclusive education may provide a basis for comparison between Eastern and Western concepts of inclusivity. Some of the issues discussed in the book are just as relevant in the Western context. In view of this, the author achieves the aims and purposes stated.

The book has seven chapters and begins by providing the reader with a historical perspective of the development of the meritocratic educational system from Confucius to recent events. It also highlights the effects of implementing the global policy of *Education for All*. In Chapter 2, the author's insight offers a culturally rich interpretation of how global initiatives are manifested, and how ground-level practitioners cope with government expectations for the rapid transformation of its educational system. The reader is led through various international literatures that support the key issues considered by the author to affect educational policy in China such as student tracking, the intense focus on preparing students for examinations, and, most of all, student results. These issues are then posited to

act as caveats for the implementation and development of inclusive education in Chinese schools.

Chapter 3 situates the education policy for inclusion within the key developments of Beijing's education system. The author provides extensive information and links to previous research studies, which is useful for those searching for a historical frame of reference about the development of inclusion and education in China. Yu further focuses his attention on the changing landscape of the teaching profession and the strict adherence to producing high-quality teachers, plus the promotion of teacher collaboration from pre-service teacher education as indications of the changing practices. He also looks at the conflicts between China's desire to transform the educational system, the historical concept of teaching as a life-long vocation, and the existing Chinese labour laws.

In Chapter 4, Yu introduces the case-study schools. The implementation of inclusive education policy is explored from the practitioners' point of view. All four schools are located in one of the most populous areas of Beijing. The chapter begins with a definition of inclusive education, followed by a discussion of the differences in how the government inclusion policy is adopted by each school. Yu further shows how the policy is realized from a school leadership angle. For instance, "the principal's prescription" (p. 49) for the implementation of inclusive education in the first school is centred on differentiated instruction; in the second school, the focus is on practical instruction and close networks for student and parental support; in the third school, inclusive education is perceived as an add-on to existing practices, therefore, additional after school programs are provided for students; and in the fourth school, inclusive pedagogical practices include differentiated instruction. Yu then mindfully directs the reader to an awareness of school leadership and their concerns. Challenges faced by all four principals, for instance, include the lack of financial assistance and access to material resources, and as such, school leaders in China seem to face similar challenges to peers working in Western contexts. With respect to inclusion, Yu explores the principals' particular concerns about staff low expectations of students of lower academic ability, and demonstrates that current practices include students with special educational needs being sidelined into practical courses as opposed to academic programmes, which affects staff opinion.

Chapter 5 jumps to staff perceptions of their chosen profession and their reflections on implementing the inclusive education policy, in this instance, dismantling the student tracking process. The cross-case analysis is addressed in Chapter 6. The most progressive practices identified with inclusion, however, are found through the leadership provided within one particular school. Finally, Chapter 7 ties the book together by restating the research questions and connecting issues in the current government policy with data.

The factors for comparison are not common to the schools under scrutiny, and I was disappointed in the attention paid to each case in the cross-case analysis. Furthermore, clarification about the methodology for data collection, the length of time spent in each school, and data verification procedures would have been welcomed. Additional difficulties that I had with the book include the themes that helped organize the presentation of data in this grounded theory study, and I found this to be the least objective part of the research and difficult to verify. Studies of this nature are often carefully negotiated between participants and the researcher; therefore, more on Yu's own perspectives and bias in relation to the difficulties of researching such a politically sensitive educational policy in his homeland would have been well received. Moreover, Yu's suggestions about how the dilemmas may be rectified, given the author's background and expertise, could offer a substantial potential to promote the necessary dialogue in moving inclusive practices forward.

There is clearly a need for more discourse concerning the meaning of inclusive education in China, as from the outset of the book the implementation of inclusion in Beijing schools seems to have a different meaning to inclusive education in Western countries. The strength of the book lies in the well-researched and clearly presented background information provided by the author concerning the growth, development, and the current implementation of inclusive education in China. The insight from Yu's research into the specific educational contexts in Beijing indicates that there are common struggles experienced by Chinese teachers concerning inclusion, policy, and practice, which may be of interest to the international audience.

Gleaning specific information about the issues within the current educational system in China, more specifically the inclusion of students with special educational needs, is demanding for researchers in this country, and the restrictions this can place upon researchers is of note to international researchers reading this book. However, Yu's critique of the current system, the pitfalls, and the challenges of implementing inclusive education policy is a conscious move forward towards establishing better schools for all. This reflects similar struggles experienced in some developed countries. In this sense, this book not only gives one an understanding of the process of implementing inclusive education in China but also that of many other countries. Many of the themes discussed resonate with what many Western colleagues experience in their efforts to improve inclusive practice.

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