

17 Exploring Successful Inclusive Practice in China: An Inclusive Public Kindergarten in Shanghai

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Abstract

As international influences increase, the Chinese government has joined the worldwide endeavour to implement inclusion on the preschool level. One kindergarten was selected for its high quality and longest history of inclusive practices in Shanghai. A qualitative case study was conducted to explore the potential factors that contribute to this success. Findings indicated that the foremost factor is the substantial community-based support identified on three different levels: the community level, the kindergarten level, and the classroom level. Among the many community factors, the principal's support to guarantee the successful implementation of inclusive practices stands out. Based on these findings, the author intends to provide insights of relevance for key community stakeholders in German preschools as they strengthen inclusive practices.

1. Introduction

1.1 Inclusive Education in China

Together with the increasing interest to develop early childhood inclusion on the international level, Asian countries like Singapore (Yeo et al. 2011) and cities like Hong Kong (Cheuk/Hatch 2007) have gradually started to explore the implementation of inclusion on the preschool level. The Chinese government has joined the worldwide endeavour to improve the implementation of inclusion on the preschool level, aiming at improving the quality of current inclusive services by granting more children with disabilities equal educational opportunities for quality early childhood education (ECE) programs (Hu/Szente 2010).

Policies for Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Their Shortcomings

The development of preschool inclusion in China was strongly influenced by UNESCO. While UNESCO was advocating the implementation of inclusive education, China responded by initiating two national laws: (1) 'the People's Republic of China on Protection of Disabled Persons Act' (National People's Congress 1990); (2) the 'Educational Guidelines for People with Disabilities' ('National Education Committee of the People's Republic of China' 1994). Both laws acknowledged the needs for early intervention and early special education service (Gargiulo/Piao 1995) and argued that early childhood inclusion should be the main format to

offer children with disabilities the access to general preschools (Chen 1996). They serve as the fundamental ones for the advocacy and preliminary implementation of early inclusive education, calling for national endeavours to establish quality kindergarten (from birth to six) programs (Chen 1996).

The Chinese government furthered its support of the rights of children with ‘Special Educational Needs (SEN)’¹ by carrying out: (1) the ‘Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–2005)’, explicitly stating that (a) the education of infants and toddlers with disabilities in China is of great importance and (b) to place those children in inclusive preschools (National People’s Congress 2001); (2) the ‘Eleventh Five-Year Plan 2006–2010’ (National People’s Congress 2006) fulfilling the promise of including the majority of children with disabilities in regular preschools; (3) ‘fourth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee’ (Meng 2005) dedicating to establish a harmonious society, which can’t be accomplished when the educational needs of children with SEN are not met (Zhu 2005). Under those policies, more and more national planning concerning equity in education have taken place. Specifically, the Chinese government called upon professionals to explore the concept of quality preschool inclusion in the Chinese context and methods for assessment (Hu/Li 2012). Following these government initiatives, a few megacities such as Shanghai and Beijing initiated pilot preschools to include children with disabilities, but tens of millions of other children in the majority of the country still await appropriate services.

While examining the policies initiated by the Chinese government, I cannot deny their fundamental role to emphasize the value of early childhood inclusion. Nevertheless, they failed to provide specific guidelines for kindergartens and teachers to implement inclusion. A closer examination on the guidelines reveals a lack of: (1) the evaluation and assessment of the performance of children with SEN; (2) teachers’ professional knowledge of children with SEN and of inclusion; (3) an inclusive curriculum and activity designs; (4) clarifications of governmental roles in the implementation process, and (5) sustainable funding resources. Therefore, I argue that despite the strong advocacy from the laws and legislation, the situation of early childhood inclusion shares the same unfulfilled status as inclusive education on the primary and secondary school levels: most children with recognized disabilities lack access to general schools. Most regular preschools in China have neither been familiarized with the principles of inclusion nor have they considered providing this type of service (Wang/Shen 2009). A survey conducted in Hebei province revealed that none of the regular kindergartens had enrolled any children with disabilities (Jiao et al. 2004).

1.2 Preschool Inclusive Education in Shanghai

Lewin, Wang and Qu (1994) explained that China’s vast regional variations makes it challenging for researchers to conduct research that is thoroughly representative of the whole country. Thus, the current study intends only to explore the factors that contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive practices within one inclusive preschool, instead of making generalizable or transferable claims. I chose Shanghai to focus on in the current study since I am quite familiar with its inclusive education development. What’s more, since

1 Children with special educational needs (SEN) and children with disabilities are used interchangeably in this article.

Shanghai is the forefront of educational reform in China, this study will likely to generate interesting and promising findings.

Shanghai is the largest city in China, having a residential population of over 24 million of whom 9.9 million are migrants. As the economic centre of Mainland China, Shanghai has a GDP that is well above the national average (Wang 2016). Since 1949, Shanghai has served as the exemplary city for experimenting educational reforms and those that prove effective will be potentially further implemented in other parts of China (Arens 1952). It was the first city in China to implement the 9-year compulsory education (6-year primary education and 3-year junior secondary education), a policy which plays a fundamental role in developing inclusive education. Starting from 2009, this city attracted more attention for its extraordinary performance of Shanghai students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), vividly described as to have provoked a ‘PISA-shock’ (Takayama 2008).

In the past years, while many cities are still striving for a higher enrolment rate of students in general school settings, Shanghai’s education guiding philosophy shifts from quantity to quality (ShCoE, 2010). Specifically, four perspectives were proposed to reach the goal of a quality education for all: advocating equity, pursuing excellence, promoting innovation and supporting development. Specifically, on the preschool level, Shanghai Municipal Commission of Education (SMCE) has started to persistently pursue the goal of providing children with SEN with three years of high-quality early childhood education and has dedicated itself to reaching this goal since then (Hu/Szente 2010). Meanwhile, the Shanghai government has carried out the ‘Three-Year Special Education Action Plan (2014-2016)’ to develop its special and inclusive education programs. Taking the district where the researched kindergarten is located as an example: since 2013, within Chang Ning district, six kindergartens accepted children with disabilities and by 2016, there were eleven kindergartens that engaged themselves in early childhood inclusion. In order to guarantee its current progress, Chang Ning district further implemented its ‘Chang Ning District Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)’ (Chang Ning District 2010) that aims to improve overall pre-school education quality.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Importance of Community Involvement in the School Inclusion Process

According to Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, and Earle (2006) and Donohue and Bornman (2014), the direction of discussions about inclusive education is slowly shifting from the justification of why schools should adopt this approach to how they can successfully implement inclusion. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ‘ecological theory’ strongly emphasizes the importance of school and community partnerships. Specifically, this theory states that children’s learning and development are influenced significantly by the contexts of home, community, and school and that when continuity between these is improved they exert more positive influence on children’s development. Empirical studies also show the essential role of the community involvement in schools in the successful implementation of inclusive education (e.g., Loreman 2007; Rouse/Florian 1996): (1) the participation of the community as a critical element fostering

students' better achievement (Apple/Bean 2007; McAlister 2013); (2) the involvement of the community as one of the main factors contributing to the creation of a climate conducive to learning (Stoll 1991). In some countries where inclusion is at its preliminary stage, such as South Africa, the participation of the community is perceived as key to tackle the challenges of developing inclusion (e.g., Lomofsky/Lazarus 2001). Meanwhile, this connection between schools and communities is more strongly called for, since schools have, to a strong degree, become disconnected from our fractured modernist society (Elkins 2005).

Traditional perceptions regard schools as organizations where members involved are motivated by self-interests and therefore tend to seek to maximize gains and cut losses (Sergiovanni 1994). Nevertheless, community involvement in schools emphasizes the need for intersectoral collaboration of all vital actors in the school and the community members to promote inclusive education together (Gómez-Zepeda et al. 2017; Rouse/Florian 1996; Turnbull et al. 2007). It emphasizes that different community members are socially organized around relationships and the strongly felt interdependencies that nurture them. It thus contributes to the construction of schools themselves as communities where the connections of people are involved with purposes and commitment, which is essential for democratic collaboration and thus more inclusive practice (Sergiovanni 1991; 1994).

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodological Considerations

While taking a thorough look at the research methodologies from the previous research studies conducted to examine inclusion at Chinese preschools, I identified that many of them are exclusively quantitative, applying questionnaires and generating quantitative observations (e.g., Hu et al. 2016). Only very few follow a non-positivist paradigm that recognizes the value of social constructivism where the explorations of the researched phenomenon take place in its most naturalistic settings (e.g., Hu et al. 2011). Thus, a single case-study design was applied in the current inquiry for its strong explorative orientation and relatively flexible design. Moreover, the core characteristic of a case study is its outward-looking nature (Cohen 2003), so the factors identified from the current study that contribute to the success of the researched kindergarten could thus provide indications for inclusive practice in Germany and other countries.

3.2 The Researched Kindergarten

A detailed description of the researched kindergarten is an essential component in a case study report and will direct others in deciding for themselves the appropriateness of generalizing case study findings to other contexts (Stake 2010). Specifically, the researched kindergarten was founded in 1991, being then the only inclusive kindergarten in Chang Ning district. Located within a middle-class living community, the kindergarten has been the largest

public one, taking up around 2283 square meters. By the time I collected the data in 2017, there were 175 children aged from three to six and 21 people working as teaching staff. In total, there are seven classes: two classes for children aging from 3 to 4; two classes for children aging from 4 to 5; two classes for children aging from 5 to 6; one special class for children with mixed ages from 3 to 6.. Each classroom, according to the ‘Shanghai Guideline for Kindergarten Education’, has two main teachers and one teacher’s aide who helps out with the daily routine and clean-up (called *bao yu yuan* (BYY) in Chinese), leading to an average student-teacher ratio of 15:1 to 20:1. The kindergarten has good basic infrastructure including some technological equipment (e.g., PC, Beamers, LED screen) to make teaching more diversified and fun.

3.3 Research Methods

In total, seven in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted: one with the principal, one with the teaching director, two with special educators, and three with general teachers. Those interviews were designed to explore the potential factors that contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive practices within the kindergarten. Participatory observation was also applied in the current study. In total, the researcher conducted ten intensive sessions (15 minutes for each) of participatory observations during ‘free play’ time. In addition, all the kindergarten website news and updates regarding inclusive practices (from September 2017 until November 2017) were systematically examined to analyse the potential factors that contribute to the inclusive practices of the researched kindergarten.

3.4 Data Analysis

Since most of the data were in Chinese, the researcher needed to first translate them into English. During the translation process, several challenges appeared: 1) there were some words that appeared specifically only in the researched kindergarten context, which were quite challenging to translate into English words that could express their full meanings (e.g., the translation of the ‘*qi zhi class*’ due to its transitional role differing from a special class). 2) there were many words that only existed in the general Chinese kindergarten context, e.g., *bao yu yuan* (BYY) with their varied responsibilities and roles differing from aide teachers; 3) some teachers sometimes spoke in Shanghai dialect during interviews and observations, which made the translation process more difficult.

Overall, qualitative content analysis was applied to analyse the observational, interview and document data in the current research project (Kohlbacher 2005). Mayring (2004) proposed the process of an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis consisting of the following main aspects: 1) selecting the units of analysis, 2) open coding, 3) preliminary code formulation, 4) creating categories, and 5) creating levels of the categories. Open coding was conducted with *Atlas.ti* and all data were clustered and coded, then analysed to confirm and build on the findings from the previous study. Specifically, data from the interviews with the principal were analysed by noting patterns and themes and clustered according to those

themes. Data from the participatory observations and document review were utilized to support or refute developing patterns and themes.

4. Results

From the current study, I have identified the active involvement of different members from the community that serves as the main factor contributing to the successful implementation of inclusive education in this Chinese kindergarten. In total, I have categorized those community members into three levels: (1) the first level talks about the involvement of members from the community, such as parents, the shadow teacher,² and the ‘Chang Ning Special Education Centre’; (2) the second level focuses on the involvement of people within the kindergarten level: the principal and the (special) educators; (3) the third level targets the involvement of members on the classroom level: other main teachers (including intern teachers) and bao yu yuan (BYY).

4.1 Involvement of the Members on the Community Level

4.1.1 *Involvement of the Special Education Centre*

‘Chang Ning Special Education Centre’ serves as the key source of support for the researched kindergarten since its first day of inclusive practice: (1) it provides regular in-service teacher training on special and inclusive education to all staff, in the hope of informing everyone with different theories and effective practices; (2) it puts much effort into constructing a ‘central expert team’ consisting of a select group of different stakeholders (e.g., teachers, professors, principals, parents) that organizes regular meetings to visit the researched kindergarten for systematic assessment of inclusion practice and supports official diagnosis of children with SEN by working with the researched kindergarten.

4.1.2 *Involvement of the Professor*

Professor Zhou³ is an expert in inclusive preschool education from East China Normal University and has established a long-term cooperation with the researched kindergarten. Her involvement includes the following aspects, improving the perceptions teachers have towards inclusion and empowering them with concrete strategies to implement inclusive education. She shows teachers how to do action research projects to improve their daily inclusive practice: “Our teachers really love to work with Professor Zhou; she always brings us her

2 The shadow teachers: they are mainly college students still majoring in special education and are employed by parents of children with SEN to accompany the learning and participation of the children in the general schools (usually starting from primary schools). When placed in the international context, they can be most nearly compared to special educators.

3 Professor Zhou: a pseudonym for the professor.

experiences of how inclusion works in other cultures as well as her in-depth understanding of what challenges our teachers face” said the principal in the interview. “She knows what we are most afraid of,” said teacher Chen in her interview, “she spent so much time in the classroom with us, so she knows how we are doing daily and what we find challenging”. To cooperate with the main teachers is her another important role, for example, when Professor Zhou went to the classroom two when the “small group life-skill activity” session was on and the children were busy peeling the beans for the kitchen. Child E was not interacting with his peers but observing them, showing interest. Professor Zhou saw him and bent down on her knees. “This looks fun!” she said and then waited until E responded to her. “Yes,” said E slowly, “Look, child Li⁴ seems to have difficulty in putting the bean skins in the bowl because her hands are too full. Would you like to help her by passing her the other bowl?” “Okay,” said E but did not push the bowl. “See, like this, just push it like this,” encouraged teacher Liu.⁵ Professor Zhou then pushed the bowl gently lying in front of E a bit and E also started to imitate her by pushing the bowl further. “Exactly, you are doing great!” commented Professor Zhou after E did that. “Thank you,” said child Li, smiling at E. Then child Li invited E to join her in peeling the beans together. During the whole process, teacher Liu supported Professor Zhou whenever it was needed and she also did not interrupt them even though the session was already over. In this type of cooperation, teachers play a more cooperative role and Professor Zhou plays a more leading role.

4.1.3 *Involvement of the Parents*

Parents play a crucial role in supporting more inclusive practices from the researched kindergarten. Specifically, some are actively involved in teachers’ activity design that targets promoting the participation and social interactions of children with SEN. Teacher Liu from the inclusive class three asked child E’s parents to continue to play the ‘pretend play’ that was carried out in her classroom during the ‘free play’ session, seeking to enhance child E’s interest to play as a ‘doctor’. This continuation of efforts would, in the end, contribute to E’s interest in the ‘role-play’ session, increasing his participation in the classroom activities and potentially promote his interactions with his peers. Teacher Chen, on the other hand, talked to child F’s parents to stick to the ‘social rules (strictly implemented in the classroom)’ at home: which was to have the same requirement for child F’s certain behaviours as for his peers, during, for example, a conflict situation. Through emphasizing that child F should try to ask his peers nicely first before grabbing the toys from others, teachers’ cooperation with parents directly contributed to the decrease of F’s challenging behaviours and the increase of socially appropriate behaviours.

4.1.4 *Involvement of the “Shadow Teacher”*

Shadow teachers are teachers that some parents of children with SEN have employed to support their children to learn and participate in a general school. Within the researched kindergarten, shadow teachers are highly regarded and teachers try to get them involved as much as possible. Firstly, main teachers seek opportunities to exchange with them regarding how

4 Child Li: a pseudonym for this child.

5 All teachers’ names are pseudonyms.

to improve the social inclusion and participation of children with disabilities whenever the shadow teachers are present in the classroom. They were often observed to consult the shadow teachers for certain strategies they needed to deal with children's problems: teacher Chen was observed to consult the shadow teacher about the method of 'social story' and to learn more to better deal with child F's disruptive behaviour against his peers. Secondly, they also try to involve shadow teachers in certain classroom activities to encourage children to interact with their peers: "E, I saw you were playing the ball with the others during the mixed-age activity time and that looks really fun. Would you like to share it with us?" suggested teacher Liu, "Yes, E, I also saw that and that you played with this girl, right? Would you like to tell us something about it?" encouraged the shadow teacher. Then E stood up and went to the centre of the classroom, starting to tell his peers what he played.

4.2 Involvement of the Members on the Kindergarten Level

This level focuses intensively on the involvement of professionals within the kindergarten, those who are officially employed by the kindergarten compared to the level of stakeholders from the community level. Specifically, it mainly addresses the active involvement of the principal and special educators.

4.2.1 The Active Involvement of the Principal

A supportive administrator serves as one of the fundamental sources for the successful implementation of inclusive education (Shogren et al. 2015). The principal in this researched kindergarten serves as the core individual who tries to establish an inclusive culture by involving everyone actively in the inclusion process. From the macro-level, she serves as the critical role to advocate and promote different policies regarding (1) how to sustainably develop inclusive education and (2) how to create an inclusive culture within the kindergarten. All teachers spoke very highly of her and emphasized her key role in establishing inclusion within the kindergarten: "Our principal is very determined and she has committed almost 20 years to inclusive education" said the teaching director from the interview; "we would never continue this inclusion journey if we do not have our principal. She is like the light guiding us for inclusion" mentioned the special educator Gao in her interview. From the micro-level, she was observed to take a very active part in participating in the inclusion process from co-designing a more inclusive curriculum and activities with all teachers and supporting their daily inclusion practice to having regular one-to-one talks with teachers whenever they faced challenges or problems in the inclusion process.

4.2.2 The Active Involvement of the Special Educators

There are four special educators for the special class ('qi zhi class' in Chinese), which serves as the transitional class for children with diagnosed disabilities who are first enrolled in the kindergarten and waiting to be transferred to the general class based on their progress. There are, in total, ten children with a wide range of disabilities in the class. The kindergarten values

the professional knowledge and skills special educators have and regard their involvement as key in promoting inclusion. They have created various opportunities to involve the special educators. Firstly, regular and official exchanges between special educators and main teachers occur every month. Those exchanges mainly focus on how to improve the participation and learning of children with SEN in the general classroom as well as how to deal with different challenges in the inclusion process and it is observed that there is constant communication between special educators and general teachers in daily practice. Secondly, both special educators and general teachers are invited to co-design and evaluate the inclusive activities, for example, the 'mixed-age group activity' is one of the cooperation. Thirdly, establishing mentoring relationships between special educators and general teachers, such as that each of the four special educators act as a mentor for two to three general teachers and meet monthly for exchange.

4.3 Involvement of the Members on the Classroom Level

4.3.1 The Involvement of Other Main Teachers (Including Intern Teacher)

Cooperation among teachers is crucial for successful inclusive teaching and it has been an unspoken but well-shared value. When one main teacher is occupied by some unforeseen event, another teacher will take the main responsibility to continue the current teaching or the ongoing activity without being asked to. Specifically, teachers cooperate to enable more participation and learning of children with SEN to take place. They were always observed together to encourage children with SEN to participate in a certain activity: "Come on, you can do that" said teacher Liu, "yes, you can, you can first try it out," said teacher Chen immediately after teacher Liu. In another situation, main teachers from inclusive classroom one were observed discussing how to promote children's peer interactions while designing the "outdoor play session". In inclusive classroom three, teacher Li was on medical leave and an intern teacher served as her substitute. Teacher Yao allocated tasks to the intern teacher to support the learning and participation of children with SEN and had regular communications and exchanges with her. It was often observed that the intern teacher participated in different seminars focusing on learning as well as special and inclusive education.

4.3.2 Cooperation with the BYY

Bao yu yuan (BYY)'s responsibilities mainly contain the following aspects: maintain the classroom's cleanliness, arrange for lunch and snack time, and support the organization of classroom activities. In this kindergarten, their ages range from 40 to 65 and they work for the same class from the moment the children enter the kindergarten. Apart from the basic tasks they all share, some BYYs also tend to have more responsibilities compared to the others: for example, supporting main teachers to implement different learning tasks and activities or supporting the child with SEN to learn and participate. Specifically, BYY three from inclusive class three sometimes acts as the main teacher and seems to be given more credit by the teachers compared to the intern teacher.

The kindergarten tries to involve every BYY in the inclusion process since they serve as valuable sources for cooperation to promote more inclusive practices. Teachers actively involve them in some activity designs: (1) communicating with the BYYs regularly on how to work together to encourage more participation of children with SEN; (2) inviting BYYs to reflect together on how to improve their cooperation: “after the whole day, we also like to invite our BYY to join us to talk about the whole day together and see how we can improve for the future” said Cai in her interview. Meanwhile, it was also observed that the two sides cooperate to engage children with SEN to participate. For example, during the outdoor free-play session, teacher Cai and BYY one tried to invite child C to join in the ball-throwing: “hey, C, do you also want to play the ball with us” suggested teacher Cai after seeing child C was left alone. “This looks really fun, C, and look how Gui Gui Gui is doing it,” BYY one encouraged C further. Child C started to observe child Gui Gui and how he interacted with teacher Cai, then she also joined them playing with the ball. Teacher Cai and BBY one first both played with the two children, but they then slowly withdrew themselves.

5. Conclusions

The current study focuses on one of the pilot inclusive preschools in Shanghai and examines the potential factors that contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive education by applying a constructivist qualitative case-study approach. Open-ended interviews, participatory observations, and documents were collected during fieldwork over three months. To start with, very active involvement of community members from three levels is defined as the core factor. The three levels of community members are from the classroom, the kindergarten and the community – stakeholders from within and outside of the researched kindergarten. Secondly, new community members to support more inclusion are also identified: the shadow teacher and the bao yu yuan (BYY). Thirdly, among the many factors, the key role of the principal stands out since she serves as the instructional leader who is critical to the implementation of inclusion for the kindergarten. Those successful experiences can provide valuable guidelines for kindergartens in Germany and other countries to implement inclusive practices.

5.1 The Active Involvement of the Community from the Three Levels

Consistent with what Loreman (2007) and Rouse and Florian (1996) emphasized, I present from the current study further evidence indicating the crucial role of the involvement of the community in preschools for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Specifically, I identified the active involvement of various community members from three different levels who contribute to the inclusive practices of the researched kindergarten, which echoes with previous studies indicating that multiple agencies from the community, including general teachers, peers, support teachers, families, volunteers, and other social agents are key to the successful inclusive practices (e.g., Gómez-Zepeda et al. 2017). Meanwhile, the three levels of cooperation also contribute to a more thorough and systematic understanding of the

different community agencies compared to previous literature (e.g., Turnbull et al. 2007). German researchers (e.g., Prengel 2017) discussed the value of establishing a “caring community” to promote better inclusive practice in which children’s emotional, social, and cognitive learning support and enhance each other. Nevertheless, few talked about how specifically to establish such community. Thus, based on the findings of the current study and my own experience of working as a support teacher for children with disabilities in German inclusive kindergartens, I suggest that German kindergartens start conversations with a wide range of different community members such as support teachers to discuss concrete strategies to involve them in the inclusion process.

As Loreman et al. (2005) argued about parents’ involvement as the most important element for successful inclusion, teachers in the current researched kindergarten actively try to involve parents in certain activities targeting to increase participation and social interactions of children with SEN. Though some German researchers (Peters 2015; Platte 2014) emphasized the key role parents play in the kindergarten inclusion process, discussions on specific ways of how to engage them into the kindergarten have not been comprehensively researched. The current study thus provides some specific examples for kindergartens and teachers in Germany and other countries to include parents in the inclusion process, aiming to create more sustainable inclusive practice.

5.2 New Community Factors Identified from the Current Study

The current study makes vital contributions to the literature on the potential factors that influence the successful implementation of inclusive education by identifying new community members in the kindergarten’s inclusion process, such as the involvement of “shadow teachers” from the community level and the involvement of “bao yuan yuan (BYY)” from the kindergarten level.

To start with, shadow teachers’ active involvement in classroom life and their cooperation with the main teachers contribute to more inclusive practices. The concept of ‘shadow teachers’ first appeared in some Chinese NGOs (non-governmental organizations) specifically for children with autism. Their main responsibilities include accompanying children to learn and participate in general school settings; carrying out regular assessment of children’s development; and giving children extra “one-to-one” intervention programs after school (Wang 2016). Since there are very few special educators in most Chinese kindergartens, some parents would have to employ shadow teachers to fulfil the special educators’ role. Most of the shadow teachers are still students majoring in special education in universities, having a good knowledge of special education and some experiences with children with disabilities (Wang 2016). They are potentially very valuable to the sustainable development of inclusive practices for every Chinese inclusive kindergarten. In the researched kindergarten, main teachers hold very positive attitudes towards the presence of the shadow teachers and involve them in certain activity designs (e.g., European Commission 2005). Furthermore, main teachers initiate conversations with the shadow teachers when facing certain challenges and shadow teachers also try to talk with the main teachers for some updates of certain children with SEN.

That the general teachers and the shadow teachers continuously work together to design some curricula and activities demonstrates the very characteristics of an interactive co-

teaching relationship, which is considered as the key to implement successful inclusive practice (Mastropieri/Scruggs 2013). This interactive and interdependent relationship also directly contributes to more social interactions between children with and without SEN. Team teaching between general teachers and special educators has been widely recognized as one of the biggest challenges facing many inclusive preschools, for example, in Germany (see Schelle/Friederich 2015; Tures/Neuß 2017). In fact, while working in two German inclusive kindergartens, there were almost no cooperation between the main teachers and me. For most of the time, I was the support teacher who only needed to take care of the children with disabilities and there were rare communications taking place regarding curriculum or activity plans. Thus, the current study offers some valuable guidance to kindergartens regarding (1) how to define the role of special educators in the general classroom; (2) how to develop the relationship between the general teachers and special educators; (3) how general teachers could engage special educators in their lesson planning and activity designs. Nevertheless, it should also be noted the exact roles of the shadow teachers in this researched kindergarten still differ from the ones of the special educators in Germany and other countries and thus certain adaptations should be made to fit in the concrete inclusive preschool context (Stangvik 2010).

Secondly, though a clear definition of their roles is lacking, the involvement of the BYYs serves as one key element for making more inclusive practices possible, either through their support directly to the children with SEN or collaboration with the main teachers. This positive experience with the BYYs from the researched kindergarten offers a good example to illustrate the key value of involving every staff within the kindergarten in the inclusion process, one of the key features of an inclusive school culture (e.g., Strathern 2012; Zollers et al. 1999). During the one and a half years working as the support teacher in German inclusive kindergartens, I seldom was offered any training opportunity on special/inclusive education compared to the main teachers. Therefore, German kindergartens that aim for successful implementation of inclusive education could learn from the researched kindergarten about the specific ways they involve the BYYs and every other staff in the whole inclusion process to establish an inclusive culture. Specifically, they should learn from the researched kindergarten to involve every staff member in inclusive and special education training, equipping everyone with necessary theoretical knowledge and practical strategies to promote inclusive education. Only when everyone in the kindergarten holds similar goals and acquires the necessary knowledge and skills will sustainable inclusion be possible.

The Key Role of the Principal

The key role of the principal is very much emphasized from the researched kindergarten to successfully implement inclusive education, which resonates with previous research studies showing that school principals are key instructional leaders to both the attitudinal shifts and behavioural practices associated with success in inclusive education (Shogren et al. 2015; McLeskey et al. 2014; Robinson et al. 2008). Consistent with previous research studies (DeMatthews 2014; Hoppey/McLeskey 2013; Villa/Thousand 2005), the principal's expectations, support, modelling, and guidance are the major influencing factors for the successful implementation of inclusion. Moreover, previous research failed to show a comprehensive understanding of a principal's concrete involvement in the inclusion process (Praisner 2003). The current study, based on the "comprehensive approach to school administration and diversity" proposed by Riehl (2000), identified concrete strategies the principal has applied to

promote more inclusive practice from the following three perspectives: (1) fostering new meanings about diversity; (2) promoting inclusive practices within schools; (3) building connections between schools and communities. Thus, the current study contributes to a clearer understanding of the principal's involvement in the kindergarten's inclusion process and thus provides useful guidelines for kindergartens in Germany and other countries to better develop inclusion.

- (1) **Fostering new meanings about diversity:** the principal helps establish a democratic system of communication that allows every teacher to disagree with certain policies and practices and to make recommendations for changes; involves every staff to collaboratively build the inclusion philosophy together, which has been effective to create educational practices that respond actively to the needs of diverse students (Booth 2011; Corson 1995; Riehl 2000).
- (2) **Promoting inclusive practices within schools:** the principal organizes training for every staff member to master knowledge and skills to realize inclusion philosophy through practice; values the "social relationships" with teachers by involving them in activity design and evaluations of inclusive practices (Hopkins 2001).
- (3) **Building connections between kindergartens and communities** (see, e.g., Rouse/Florian 1996): the principal leads the "central expert team" from the "Chang Ning Special Education Centre"; initiates and participates in a teacher training program and acts as a strong advocate to develop inclusive education within the researched kindergarten and within kindergartens from other districts in Shanghai; and includes shadow teachers and parents into activity designs and establishes close cooperation with parents of children with SEN.

Johnston and Hayes (2007) indicated the necessity of conceptualizing professional learning as the pedagogical practice of educational leaders, explaining that every practitioner, including the principals, need to "learn new things" not just "do new things." The current study identifies the principal's key roles and clusters concrete strategies, initiatives and behaviours into three perspectives focusing specifically on how such leaders may foster new meanings of diversity, promote inclusive practices as well as build connections between kindergartens and communities. These lessons from Shanghai provide valuable insight into the conceptualization of potential leadership development and professional learning curricula for inclusive preschools in Germany and other countries.

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