Research Article:

# The Extent of Teacher Leadership for Inclusive Education among Regular Education Teachers in Guizhou, China

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## ABSTRACT

China's "Learning in Regular Classroom" policy provides educational support to students with disabilities in regular classrooms. However, the effectiveness of this policy is challenged by factors related to teachers' understanding of disabilities, teaching practices, and the top-down educational orientation and management systems in China. Drawing on evidence from past studies in other countries, teacher leadership has been shown to promote professional growth, increase collaboration between teachers, and facilitate teachers' efficacy in teaching students, but the extent to which teacher leadership is practiced in China to support students with disabilities is not known. This study aimed to explore the extent to which teacher leadership shaped the perspectives of Chinese regular education teachers towards inclusive education and disabilities, and their practice of teacher leadership to support inclusive education. Using a qualitative research design, seven secondary school regular education teachers who were recruited using a snowball sampling method in Guizhou Province, were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview data were coded inductively and analysed using thematic analysis. Three interconnected themes emerged: (a) lack of teacher leadership in building a community of practice to support students with disabilities but a heavy reliance on school leaders and policymakers to support these students; (b) supporting inclusive education but regarding it as impractical and misaligned with other educational policies and teachers' responsibilities; and (c) lack of proper understanding about students with disabilities and perceiving their academic skills as unimportant. Given the conflict between teachers' support for disabilities but their lack of knowledge and skills to support disabilities and the absence of teacher leadership, this article considers training in disability knowledge and teacher leadership as essential to motivate regular education teachers to engage more in fostering inclusive policies and practices in China.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, disabilities, teacher leadership, regulation education teachers, Guizhou, China, LRC

## INTRODUCTION

The recognition of the need for special and inclusive education in China emerged in the late 19th century with the "Learning in Regular Classroom" (LRC) or "Sui Ban Jiu Du" (in Mandarin) initiative as a key movement to provide children with disabilities access to regular government-supported neighbourhood schools (Xu et al., 2018). LRC was a response to the crisis of a large population of 50 million children with disabilities in the 1980s, but a low enrolment rate of only 6% of those children in schools. The LRC movement expanded from eight counties to almost all provinces and municipalities in China (Xu et al., 2018), and the number of children with disabilities in regular classrooms increased to about 49% or 390,525 in 2019 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020). LRC was thus applauded as having contributed to "create a good social environment for those with disabilities and, thereby, is helpful to improve civilisation and progress in Chinese society" (Xu et al., 2018, p. 58). However, the impact of LRC on teachers' implementation of inclusive education in China has not been empirically examined to a large extent. Most recent studies in inclusive education in China focused on teachers' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs about the different aspects of inclusive education (e.g., Jia et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022; Xie & Zhang, 2022; Xu & Cooper, 2022) or self-efficacy and work motivation among teachers (Xie et al., 2022). Others focused on strategies to better support students with disabilities in an inclusive environment (e.g., Han & Cumming, 2022; Liang et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2022).

Since its inception, the LRC movement has been further supported by the enactment of the Guidelines for the Construction of Special Education Resource Rooms for Regular Education Schools (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016). Schools with five or more students with disabilities are required to have a resource room that is led by a resource room teacher (RRT). RRTs, as reported by Xie, Deng, et al. (2021), are usually regular education teachers but are given additional roles as special and inclusive education teachers to support students with disabilities in their schools. RRTs are expected to provide a wide range of support for students with disabilities including individualised teaching, consultation and even teacher training about knowledge and skills related to inclusive education (Wang & Xiao, 2017; Xie & Zhang, 2022). However, Xie et al. (2021) revealed that the RRTs in their study had limited knowledge of disabilities and inclusive education. Moreover, RRTs emerged only in recent years and exist in cities with advanced economic development such as Beijing or Shanghai (Wang & Xiao, 2017; Xie & Zhang, 2022). As regular education teachers are key to the success of inclusive education (Ainscow & Miles, 2008), the implementation of LRC in China can only be successful if the RRTs assume the role of agents of social justice and are equipped with competencies such as theoretical and practical knowledge for developing inclusive pedagogies; skills and attitudes to collaborate and build relationships with peers and others to improve learning outcomes; working with diverse families; capacity for reflection and inquiry; and a comprehensive understanding of educational change (Pantić & Florian, 2015). In China, similar competencies, such as those related to knowledge and pedagogy, communication and cooperation, skills, attitudes, beliefs, reflection and development, were also regarded as

important among inclusive teachers in Beijing (Deng et al., 2017; Mu et al., 2015). Mu et al.'s (2015) study also showed that teacher agency was exercised via proactive determination in seeking resources and support to facilitate the education of students with disabilities.

Besides competencies, transformation to an inclusive education teacher involves teacher agency in leadership roles that guide the refinement of curriculum and instructional practices through collaboration with other teachers and the entire school community, and constant efforts to address issues of inequity in their classrooms (Pantić & Florian, 2015). "The process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 287) is known as teacher leadership. Beyond maintaining their teaching responsibilities within the classrooms, teacher leaders take on responsibilities outside the classroom (Wenner & Campbell, 2017), including (a) formal teaching leadership roles such as head of department, and subject or group coordinator, and (b) informal leadership roles such as coaching, and establishing a new team or action research (Muijs & Harris, 2006). Past studies have strongly established that teacher leadership improves school development at the student, teacher and school levels. At the student level, teacher leadership promotes teachers' self-efficacy, which then indirectly encourages student learning (Öqvist & Malmström, 2018; Shen et al., 2020). At the teacher level, engagement in leadership roles enhances teachers' self-esteem and work satisfaction which subsequently act as catalysts that promote their motivation to perform (Hickey & Harris, 2018; Sales et al., 2017; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). At the school level, it has been argued that due to the combination of collaboration and responsibility and equal distribution of authority among teachers, teacher leadership could help enhance overall school effectiveness (Muijs & Harris, 2003; Sales et al., 2017).

In China, schools in economically less advanced provinces may not have developed adequate support such as resource rooms and RRTs to raise awareness about inclusive education for students with disabilities. We argue that instead of relying mainly on support from the top leadership layer of the education system, teacher leadership has the potential to empower teachers to autonomously develop knowledge, skills and resources that they lack (Hairon et al., 2015). Teacher leadership can foster the construction of collective problem-solving and responses among regular education teachers to manage the challenges of teaching and supporting students with disabilities and students' diverse needs. Teacher leadership in China has been predominantly studied in the context of regular education, but scarcely within the context of inclusive education for students with disabilities. Further, existing evidence on teacher leadership in China focused particularly on urban and more developed areas such as Shanghai (Pang & Miao, 2017; Xie, Song, et al., 2021), Zhejiang Province (Xie, Song, et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021) or Beijing (Wang & Jia, 2022), but very few studies have investigated teacher leadership in less developed areas.

This study, therefore, aimed to uncover elements of teacher leadership among secondary school regular education teachers in Guizhou Province, an underdeveloped mountainous region located in southwest China (Yuan et al., 2012). Due to its highly mountainous

special karst landscape (Yuan et al., 2012), Guizhou province generally experiences a lag and slow economic development (Jiang et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2020). There are only two special education institutions and a few rehabilitation centres for students with disabilities (Liu et al., 2022). For a population of 36 million people, disability in this province intersects with illiteracy, limited access to education and the shortage of resources (Rong & Shi, 2001; Xie & Zhang, 2023), further aggravating education inequality among those with disabilities in Guizhou. Therefore, it is imminent to investigate if teachers have been engaging in any forms of collaboration to support students with disabilities amidst the constraints in this region.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### LRC – A Catalyst for Social Justice or A Mere Crisis Response?

In 1987, LRC was first viewed as a part of a national education reform that intended to solve the problem of school entrance for children with mild intellectual disabilities in geographical locations where no special classes were available (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 1987). Through China's Five-Year (1988–1992) Project for Disabled Persons (State Council of China, 1988), LRC then expanded to also serve children with intellectual, hearing and visual disabilities. It was not till the introduction of the more recent Special Education Promotion Plan (2014–2016) and the Guidelines for Mid and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020) that students with other types of disabilities, such as ADHD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) or autism could gain access to regular classrooms (Yan et al., 2021). At the outset, the principles of LRC align with international aspirations for inclusive education to provide students with disabilities the same learning experiences as any other student instead of excluding them from regular schooling (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). In fact, studies from other countries showed that access to high-quality regular education classrooms allows students with disabilities opportunities to participate in a collaborative school environment (Clipa et al., 2019), achieve better school results than their peers who attend special education schools (Szumski et al., 2017), and socialise with their peers without disabilities (Koster et al., 2009; de Boer et al., 2011). According to Su et al. (2018), the core value of inclusive education in China parallels the Western idea of "liberal democracy with individualism value" (p. 64), which inclines to support people's individual differences and rights to development. Thus, there is an emphasis on meeting the diverse needs of all learners, as well as providing them with equal education, support, and service in high-quality regular education classrooms instead of just including them in a regular education setting (Deng & Zhu, 2007).

While some scholars in China view the LRC programme as similar to the Western version of inclusive education, others argue that the LRC is a contrast to respecting every student's right to be educated equally because it emerged out of expedient to enable compulsory education for students with disabilities through a cost-effective and rapid way to resolve the issue of the lack of special schools in the country (Deng & Zhu, 2007). Past studies have

consistently highlighted that both regular education and inclusive education policies and regulations in China often lack clear and systematic strategies to support disability resource provision and equitable evaluations of schools achievements for students with disabilities (Deng & Jing, 2013; Liu, 2007). While well-established inclusive schools in Western countries are equipped with qualified teacher and other professional staff members and appropriate facilities, the LRC to a larger extent, depends on regular education teachers' own willingness to be involved with students with disabilities, a task that is exacerbated by the dual role that the teachers have to take, i.e., being a regular teacher and inclusive teacher without adequate knowledge and skills (Li, 2022). The conflicting origins of LRC may further complicate its implementation in less economically advanced provinces of China, which is much needed. Nevertheless, given the importance of regular education teachers' role as teacher leaders in supporting students with disabilities, their collaborative efforts with each other and with families will generate effective responses to address the needs of their students, share responsibilities and develop inclusive pedagogies are crucial (Pantić & Florian, 2015). With agency, ability and initiative, teacher leaders not only guide their own professional development but actively provide developmental support to their colleagues to improve their pedagogical knowledge (Allen, 2018; Gigante & Firestone, 2008).

**Barriers to Inclusive Education in China**

The development of teacher leadership is dependent on context and educational challenges unique to the context (Liu, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2020). Although laws and policies have been enacted to promote inclusive practices in China, to date, Chinese regular education teachers' responses towards inclusive education and students with disabilities vary from generally positive to negative attitudes or comments about these students and the LRC policies (Tan et al., 2021; Xu & Cooper, 2022). To a large extent, students with disabilities are still largely ignored by their teachers in the classroom due to their struggles to participate in classroom activities without support (Li, 2022). Regular education teachers considered only students who could cope with their teaching as belonging to the regular classrooms but considered exclusion as appropriate for those with disabilities and these students belong to special schools (Deng & Zhao, 2019; Hu & Fan, 2020). Xie, Song, et al. (2021) revealed that 10 RRTs in their study struggled with heavy workloads, were confused about their roles, and felt that they had been marginalised when chosen to take on the RRT as an additional role. However, three RRTs in the study "successfully reconstructed their roles" (Xie, Deng, et al., 2021, p. 10) and willingly became the agents of inclusion and social justice for their students with disabilities. These three teachers disclosed that they actively pursued self-learning activities and obtained support from their school administrators. We contend that teachers who have become successful or are transitioning to agents of social justice are potential teacher leaders as they can enhance the impact of their competencies by exerting influence on other teachers. Without adequate competencies, it is likely that regular education teachers continue to use the conventional whole-class teaching model when teaching students with disabilities and experience failure in supporting them. Besides the lack of competencies, the Chinese regular education teachers' attitudes and engagement with teacher leadership could also be driven by contextual factors such as limited training

in special and inclusive education, large classroom sizes and the exam-oriented education system.

First, regular education teachers in China have little training and exposure to special and inclusive education. Special and inclusive education training is rarely included in universities and colleges that train pre-service teachers or if there is, the training is often offered as optional courses (Feng, 2012; Xu & Malinen, 2015). This lack of knowledge and practical experience inevitably compromises the quality of instruction for students with disabilities in regular classrooms (Su et al., 2018). Consequently, due to the low success rate in teaching students with disabilities, teachers' motivation for supporting inclusive education could be lowered (Feng, 2012). Xie et al. (2022) revealed that Chinese inclusive teachers who received training reported significantly higher self-efficacy in collaboration with others and in managing students' behaviours, a finding reported by studies from other contexts too (e.g., Akman, 2021; Gümüş et al., 2022; Tyaningsih et al., 2021). Additionally, special and inclusive education teachers are perceived as having low social status in Chinese society and education system, and this misperception can lead to problems like teacher attrition and low social or personal identity (Qu, 2021), which could eventually discourage interests in becoming disability experts and expanding disability support to regular classrooms. As there is a high demand for disability-knowledgeable teachers in regular schools, compulsory high-quality teacher training and continuous professional development in understanding disabilities and inclusive education could be the main pathway for supporting and motivating regular education teachers to become agents of inclusion and social justice.

Second, regular classrooms in China typically contain 45 students or more (Qu, 2021), thus, larger than the general class sizes of about 30 students reported in studies from Western countries such as the US, UK or Iceland (Filges et al., 2018; Shin & Chung, 2009). Although including students with disabilities in regular classrooms does not negatively impact the academic achievements of students without disabilities (Kart & Kart, 2021; Szumski et al, 2017), smaller class sizes are associated with positive outcomes as they allow for better teacher engagement with students, foster more personal teacher-student relationships and enable instructional practices to be more effective (Bosworth, 2014; Ehrenberg et al., 2001; Shin & Chung, 2009). Large classes also tend to discourage teachers from differentiating instructions and trying out new inclusive teaching methods to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Blatchford & Webster, 2018). Similarly in China, Qu (2021) argued that regular education teachers who face heavy workloads due to the large number of students are more likely to adopt teacher-centred teaching models and stricter classroom disciplining approaches, all of which could be detrimental to students with disabilities.

Third, the exam-oriented education system, namely, "Gaokao" which uses exam results as the main standard to evaluate students' learning outcomes, occupies a dominant place in the modern Chinese education system (Su et al., 2018). Under this system, schools and teachers tend to narrowly focus on training students for good grades at the expense of overlooking the additional needs of low achievers, a violation of the core spirit of inclusion

(Qu, 2021). As children with disabilities often fall under the low-performance group, these children may find it difficult to cope with the demands of examinations, and subsequently be neglected and excluded from their classes if regarded as capable of only being low performers and outliers of the system (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004). Fourth, specialised support services for regular classrooms are confined to speech and language therapy, special textbooks or resource centres for consultation but these services only exist in very limited quantity throughout the country (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004).

The barriers to inclusive education in China persist across both public and private regular education schools. Public schools are funded by the government, and they provide access to free compulsory education or the first nine years of formal schooling (Ministry of the People's Republic of China, 1986). Public schools in developed cities like Beijing or Shanghai are often equipped with well-trained teachers, modern infrastructure, state-of-the-art facilities and teaching aids but those in underdeveloped areas struggle with inadequacies in cutting-edge facilities (Wang & Jang, 2016). While the majority of children attend public schools in China, private schools have grown in popularity as an alternative to public schools (Feng, 2023) due to parental preferences for smaller class sizes, the use of specialised instruction to enhance students' academic performance, and the use of the bilingual education programmes (Li & Li, 2021). However, as private schools usually rely on students' tuition fees as their main sources of funding, they typically have strict admission requirements, such as requiring students to pass an entrance exam, a barrier to students with disabilities. Qu (2021) stressed that if students with disabilities are not considered in the wider context of education policies, the reform toward inclusion is likely to be ineffective.

**The Future of Teacher Leadership in Mobilising Inclusive Education in China**

Although there is a serious lack of guidance and expertise to effectively support students with disabilities in China, regular education teachers can still develop suitable approaches to support students with disabilities by working together. In the case of China, the effectiveness of teacher leadership in reforming teacher training, class sizes and the exam-centred education system may not be immediately prominent, but teacher leaders' incremental efforts in collaborating with each other could eventually lead to institutional changes (Mundorf et al., 2019) in improving the quality of teaching and support for students with disability. Hence, the development of inclusive education should not neglect the importance of teacher leadership.

The success of teacher leadership in improving learning and facilitating school reform relies greatly on the collaborative forms of working among teachers (Harris & Muijs, 2004) as they engage in the search for new teaching approaches (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). For instance, Supovitz et al.'s (2010) survey of 721 teachers from 38 different schools in a US district found that teachers' collaboration strongly predicted positive instructional changes in subjects such as English and Mathematics. When teachers independently lead such activities, they are more likely to be motivated by the growth in their inclusive pedagogical

knowledge and skills, which can then lead to positive changes in their self-efficacy and instructional practices (Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010) for students with disabilities. Harris and Muijs's (2004) study of teacher leadership in England revealed that when teacher leaders participated in decision-making processes within their school, they felt more included and empowered to spread good practices, which eventually contributed to school improvement.

Despite the potential of teacher leadership to bridge resource and knowledge gaps to support students with disabilities in China, the centralised top-down management leadership model could constrain teachers' engagement as teacher leaders (Deng & Guo, 2007). When leadership authorities possess centralised power to control educational reforms and other resources, teachers at the bottom levels of the hierarchical system may resort to merely taking orders from the above instead of exercising their autonomy in becoming the agents of inclusion and social justice in schools. However, Xie et al. (2022) demonstrated that when Chinese inclusive teachers developed high autonomy, their work motivation uniquely predicted high teaching efficacy. Insofar, leadership studies across different countries have focused mainly on the importance of principals or other administrators rather than exploring the role of regular education teachers in much detail, let alone linking them with leadership roles. Studies conducted on teachers' involvement in inclusive education in China focus on factors such as teachers' attitudes and perceptions, and self-efficacy (e.g., Malinen et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2022) or the overall development of inclusive education in China (e.g., Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Deng & Holdsworth, 2007). "Considering that mainland China represents about one-fifth of the global population and has the largest educational system in the world" (Malinen et al., 2013, p. 528), a deeper understanding of Chinese regular education teachers' leadership roles in supporting inclusive education would add valuable insights to understand inclusive education in similar contexts better, worldwide.

In view of the gaps in understanding the potential of teacher leadership as a catalyst for teachers' professional development in inclusive education in China, this study investigated the extent of engagement of teacher leadership among regular education teachers in the way in which they perceived disabilities and supporting students with disabilities in their schools in Guizhou. Although teacher leadership has the potential to support the development of inclusive education in China, it's crucial to understand whether regular education teachers in Guizhou, a less economically advanced province, meet the requirements for assuming teacher leadership roles. This study aimed to examine the teacher leadership activities undertaken by regular education teachers, identify gaps in their leadership practices and propose recommendations for enhancing inclusive education competencies through the development of teacher leadership. The following research questions were raised:

1.  To what extent did teacher leadership shape the Chinese regular education teachers' perceptions towards inclusive education?

2.  How did these Chinese regular general education teachers support students with disabilities in their schools?

3. To what extent was teacher leadership exercised for the implementation of inclusive education practices among the teacher participants?

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Seven secondary school teachers from Guizhou Province, China, were recruited through the snowball sampling method due to the prospective participants' hesitance in offering their views and sharing their experiences for this study without pre-existing personal connections. Snowball sampling is an efficient and cost-effective networking approach that offers opportunities to be acquainted with and establish effective communication with potential participants (Naderifar et al., 2017). Participant inclusion criteria were:

1. Secondary school regular education teachers in public or private schools in China.

2. Having teaching experiences of three years and above.

3. Having engaged with students with disabilities.

Table 1 presents the demographic data of the teachers. Four teachers were from urban schools of the province while three were from rural schools. All teachers from the rural areas taught in public schools, while in the urban area, only one teacher taught in a public school. The remaining three urban teachers taught in private schools. All teachers were below 35 years of age, with 3–9 years of teaching experience, and had a teaching qualification at the bachelor's level. Due to the snowball sampling method, all teachers were subject teachers. The majority, six of them, were core subject teachers such as English or Chinese language teachers, and only one was teaching morality, a general subject in the Chinese context.

**Table 1.** Teacher participants' background information

| Location | Code | Gender | Age | Education background | Position and address | Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | T1 | F | 25–30 | Bachelor's degree | Subject teacher, public school | 4 years |
| Rural | T2 | F | 25–30 | Bachelor's degree | Morality education, public school | 7 years |

| Location | Code | Gender | Age | Education background | Position and address | Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rural | T3 | M | 25–30 | Bachelor's degree | Subject teacher, public school | 3 years |
| Urban | T4 | M | 25–30 | Bachelor's degree | Subject teacher, public school | 4 years |
| Urban | T5 | F | 30–35 | Bachelor's degree | Subject teacher, private school | 9 years |
| Urban | T6 | F | 25–30 | Bachelor's degree | Subject teacher, private school | 5 years |
| Urban | T7 | F | 30–35 | Bachelor's degree | Subject teacher, private school | 8 years |

**Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Nottingham. This study adhered to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) regulations. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

**Instrument**

Based on past findings on inclusive education in China (e.g., Xie, Deng, et al., 2021), teachers' perspectives on disability and inclusive education (e.g., Xu & Malinen, 2015), and teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), the first author generated 12 open-ended interview questions in the English language. The questions focused on Chinese regular education teachers' perception of inclusive education, the LRC, students with disabilities, support for disabilities, and their engagement in teacher leadership activities. The interview questions' validity was ascertained in two steps. First, the second author, a higher education expert in inclusive education, reviewed the suitability and comprehensibility of the questions according to the key literature identified. Then, the first author translated the interview questions into Mandarin Chinese and administered the questions to one public secondary school teacher in Guizhou. During and after the interview, the first author noted the teacher's ease in responding to the interview questions, and the teacher's views about the suitability of language structure and questions' content. Finally, the first author modified the questions according to the teachers' responses and views. The teacher had difficulty answering questions about inclusive education because of a lack of understanding of the term "inclusive education." So, an explanation of the term "inclusive education" was

added to the interview protocol to facilitate the interview process (Appendix A). A short questionnaire was also developed to obtain background information about the teachers' background information prior to the interviews.

**Data Collection**

As data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted through online video calls using WeChat for safety reasons. The first author interviewed the participants and encouraged them to express their views freely and honestly. Probes and follow-up questions were used to expand on the participants' insights whenever necessary. The duration of the interviews ranged between 30 and 40 minutes.

**Data Analysis**

After the interviews, the first author transcribed all interview responses in the Chinese language. The interview data were then analysed using the recursive thematic approach (Miles et al., 2014), which involved continuous sorting of data into codes and then themes, and returning to the earlier stages of coding when new insights and findings emerged during the inductive coding process. The key themes and subthemes derived were translated into English and decided upon by mutual agreement between the authors.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness of the data was established by environmental triangulation (Stahl & King, 2020), by having participants from different urban and rural schools, and public and private schools in the province.

**RESULTS**

Three key themes emerged from the analysis: teachers' understanding of support, teachers' understanding of inclusive education, and teachers' understanding of disabilities (Figure 1). Each type of understanding also includes the ways in which the teachers gained knowledge, skills and resources related to the theme. The presence or absence of teacher leadership elements in their practices was specifically noted. The interview data presented in this article were translated from the participants' responses in the Mandarin Chinese language.
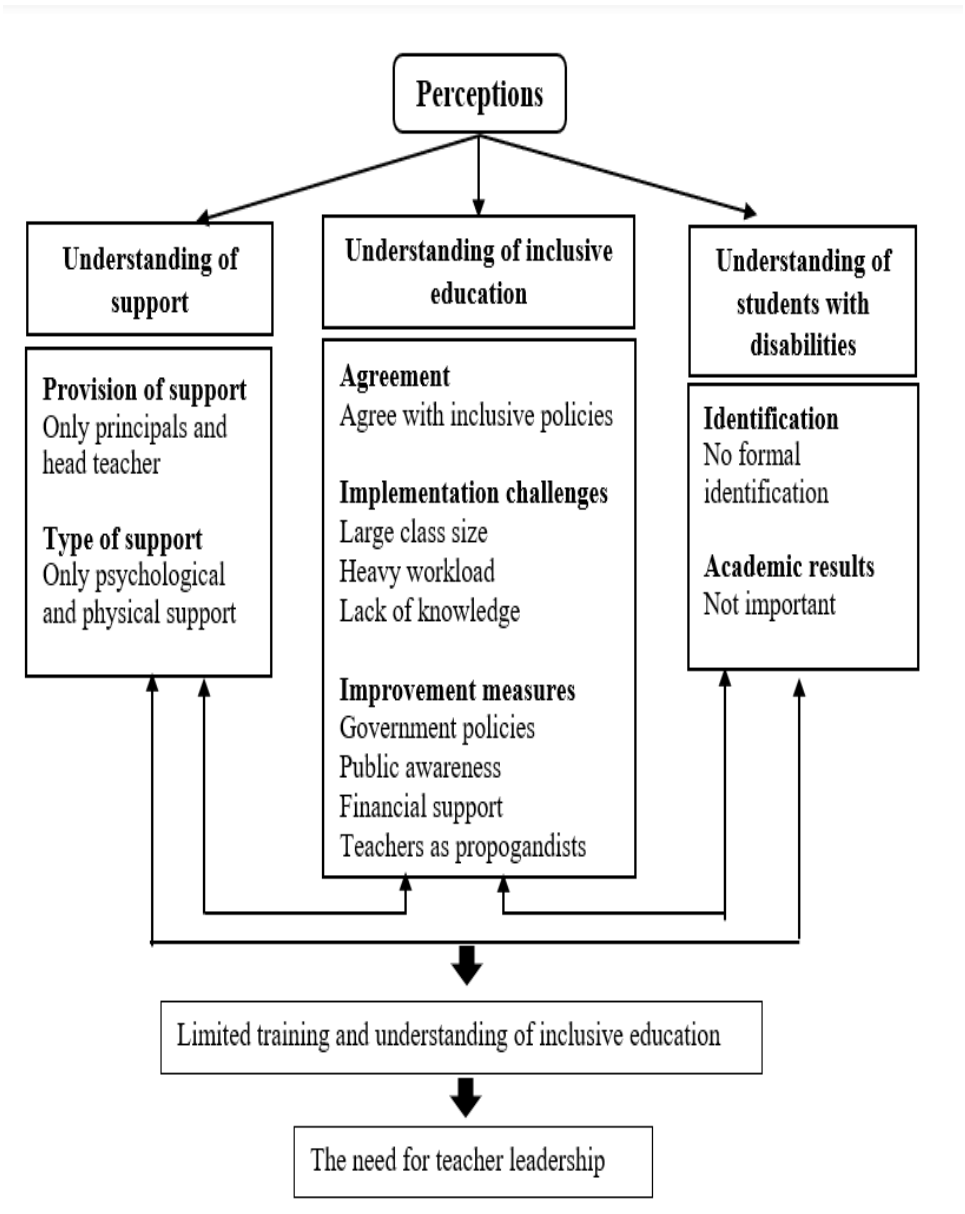
**Figure 1.** Chinese regular education teachers' perceptions of inclusive education

**Understanding of Support**

This theme refers to the teachers' understanding of who should be leading the provision of support and the types of support that should be given to students with disabilities.

*Provision of support*

All teacher participants agreed that it was necessary to teach and support students with disabilities, but none of them assumed that this main responsibility should fall on them, the subject teachers. Instead, they believed that the principals and teachers who were in charge of a class (i.e., headteacher) should be responsible for taking care of students with disabilities, and the subject teachers only assist the principal and headteachers. T1 stated that "It should be the principal who takes care of this, and if any subject teachers have these students in their classes, they will pay more attention to these students in class. Other teachers will just pay more attention to this special child." T5 commented, "My school has very few students with disabilities, only one or two. Therefore, the headteachers who are in charge of a class will be responsible for these students, and the school will assist the headteachers".

When asked to elaborate why the subject teachers viewed themselves as having no main responsibilities over students with disabilities, they expressed difficulties in offering additional support to these students because they have to manage large student numbers in each class. T2 commented:

> These students with disabilities may have problems learning the most basic arithmetic problems or English words. No matter how hard the teacher works with them, the teacher may not be able to take care of every student since there are 50 or even 60 students in one classroom.

One teacher from a rural public school, one from an urban public school and two from urban private schools, believed that only those who hold formal leadership roles should lead the support for students with disabilities. T3 showed the strongest disagreement that teachers could be leaders by commenting that "Educational leadership does not belong to the teacher" and further explained, "I think it's common knowledge that all citizens need to follow the leadership of central government." Only two teachers from urban public schools and urban private schools agreed that teachers without any formal leadership roles are also capable of leading the support for students with disabilities, but with conditions, i.e., only when "there are such students in the classroom" (T7) and they had "spare time" (T4). The former condition could only be subsumed by adequate identification of disabilities among the students in the classroom, and the latter condition depends on the time allowance given by their school authorities.

Our analysis revealed no engagement in teacher leadership collaborative activities when it comes to generating support and resources for students with disabilities. The teachers excluded students with disabilities from their main responsibilities of instructional planning, decision making and teaching delivery and insisted that only those with formal leadership authority could mobilise support. According to Harris (2005), a top-down management and hierarchical culture that China adopts not only reduces teachers' willingness and autonomy to practice teacher leadership but limits leadership roles in school since "only

one person has the final say" (Jiang et al., 2016, p. 45). Our finding aligns with past studies that found teachers within a hierarchical structure and without formal leadership roles might be reluctant to demonstrate leadership (e.g., Krieg et al., 2014). However, the study's subject teachers were willing to assist colleagues who hold formal leadership positions, an indication of a low degree of openness to engagement in teacher leadership activities. Still, they were not ready to influence or aware of ways to use their expertise and agency to lead collaborative initiatives.

### *Types of support*

The teachers' schools provided psychological and physical support to students with disabilities. Psychological support refers to departments or classroom approaches that support students' emotional well-being such as "the well-being office" (T1) or "being attentive to students' emotional struggles" (T5). Physical support refers to tangible materials or facilities such as "tuition fee waiver" (T2) and "special classrooms or walking pathways for students with disabilities within the school" (T2). Overall, the teachers were satisfied with these two types of support provision in their schools and did not see the need for more provisions because their schools were not meant for students with disabilities. They were also not aware of the policies that support students with disabilities in regular schools. Both T1 and T5 expressed, "I don't know much about the specifics of the support services at school." T1 further explained that it was because "The student's struggles do not seem very serious," while T5 mentioned that "That student is not my responsibility." T6 elaborated that:

> I think the help and support provided by my school are basically sufficient. First of all, there are not many students with disabilities in my school because 99% of them will go to special schools. When these students come to my school, the school leaders and teachers will try to help them based on their needs. After all, my school is not a specialised school for special education. And we don't focus on special education, so it is enough for us to only meet the requirements of the government.

The teachers' schools did not have any resource room and none of the teachers discerned academic or social support as necessary for their students with disabilities. Throughout the interviews, all teachers repeatedly mentioned "a limited number of students with disabilities" to justify the state of the narrow support system for students with disabilities in their schools. This justification could be attributed to their limited understanding of disabilities, the notion of social justice in inclusive education, and the LRC movement.

### Understanding of Inclusive Education

The second theme that emerged from the data is the understanding of inclusive education. The teachers showed mutual agreement with China's policies in providing educational access to students with disabilities, but were unwilling to be part of the support system and inclusive education. Thus, we did not find evidence of teacher leadership among

these teachers when it comes to mobilising support for their students with disabilities. All teachers agreed and believed that allowing students with disabilities to live and learn with their non-disabled peers was necessary, and students with disabilities should not be isolated but better integrated into society. T5 explained that:

> This group of students have certain difficulties in communicating with others and surviving like others, so letting them learn and live with other regular students can actually help them better integrate into society, and then help them make new friends and better understand their living environment.

T6 shared, "It is very necessary to make them learn to seek and create knowledge so that they can participate in social life independently and equally like other regular students in the future." However, the teachers immediately showed their hesitations in implementing inclusive education practices and policies.

The teachers shared several barriers when explaining their concerns in expanding their involvement to support students with disabilities. A major barrier mentioned by most participants was the large class sizes in regular schools. T2, as a teacher in a rural area, expressed that "It's been regulated that the number of students in each class cannot exceed 50, so in my opinion, including disabled students in regular schools is not practical. It may be effective in more advanced cities." The other two barriers were heavy workload and lack of knowledge. T2 stressed twice about teachers' heavy workload by mentioning that "If these students have mental disabilities, teachers need to attend to them according to their unique situations, but teachers do not have the time and energy for this." T1, on the other hand, was not confident with their ability to teach or lead support for students with disabilities because "What we learn in colleges is not specifically for students with disabilities, so there may be teachers who have never been in contact with such students before. It is possible that you are using the wrong method when dealing with these students, which will lead to new problems."

The teachers also equated inclusive practices as individualisation that requires extra effort and regarded the teaching of learning difficulties as requiring conflicting teaching approaches. Accommodation was viewed as giving additional support or differential treatment to students instead of a part of regular teaching. T1 shared, "Even if there is only one student with disabilities in a regular class, it requires all teachers, especially headteachers, to offer special counselling or additional help, which could be a big challenge for the school and all teachers."

Despite the teachers' disagreement that they had any key role in supporting students with disabilities, they still offered suggestions for future implementation of inclusive education. Three teachers working in rural schools stressed the need for the government to increase efforts to support students with disabilities. When asked to elaborate their views further, only one of them, T2, specified how the government should take the leadership responsibility to allocate funds for more facilities and have clearer policies to enable both

the government and teachers to be the catalysts or agents of change that drive participation from the society and peers:

> I think firstly the government must provide supporting facilities and policies, and then there must be adequate funds. Secondly, the government also needs to raise the public's attention to students with disabilities. These could lead to good effects not only at schools but also in the entire society. Thirdly, I think teachers, in particular, should play an important role in spreading awareness in helping students with disabilities, which would then encourage other students to take the initiative to care for students with disabilities. (T2)

Perhaps due to the teachers' disagreement towards having a main role in advancing inclusive education, all of them did not mention the possibility of collaborating with other teachers, their principals or the classroom teachers to support students with disabilities. They, however, are willing to play the "follower" role to support students with disabilities and to promote inclusive education.

## Understanding of Students with Disabilities

The final theme that emerged from the data is the teachers' understanding of disabilities. In general, the teachers lacked proper understanding of students with disabilities, even to the extent of having misunderstandings about disabilities. Seven teachers were confident that there were students with disabilities in their schools, but they could not identify or relate to the type of disability. They tended to use the word "could" or "might" to describe only visible disabilities. T4 mentioned, "There were some special students at my school. Some of them had problems walking, but I am not sure." T1 also encountered students with disabilities but stated that "The student might have a behaviour disorder or a speech disorder. I am not sure whether he has an intellectual disability or not, but he seemed fine at that time, so no one in particular tried to explain his situation to me." None of the teachers mentioned characteristics of invisible or hidden disabilities such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia or other neurodevelopmental conditions. Inadequate knowledge about disabilities is a common factor established by past studies as the attributing factor to misconceptions and unwillingness to be part of the inclusive education ecosystem (Kuyini et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2022; Xu & Malinen, 2015). Their inadequate understanding of disabilities could also be a direct consequence of the lack of a formal identification service in regular schools, and the absence of a source of reference or specialist that the teachers could access and network for disability identification.

Two teachers, T2 and T5, noted that the academic results of students with disabilities were less important than teaching these students about their safety and obedience. Teachers' low academic expectations of students with disabilities are common and students with disabilities could easily be stereotyped as having low potential in developing their academic proficiency, especially those with challenging behaviours (Pit-ten Cate & Glock, 2018). In China, regular secondary schools have to also focus on preparing students for national exams due to the high emphasis on exam results, a possible reason why the academic achievements

of students with disabilities are given limited attention by the regular education teachers and the school's focus (Qu, 2021).

All teachers except T6 had never participated in any training programs related to disability or inclusive education. T6 however did not find the training useful for regular school teachers. According to T6, "My school does not focus on special or inclusive education, so such training is barely useful." None of the teachers in this study had attempted to initiate support services or training programs and tended to rely predominantly on the government or their superiors for leadership in providing disability support and training. For instance, T4 expressed "I'm just a normal schoolteacher with too much work to do. I can't provide too much help by leading."

## DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged from the data, teachers' perceptions towards inclusive education, support for students with disabilities, and teacher leadership for inclusive education were associated with their lack of involvement in teacher leadership activities and demonstrated contradicted views of inclusive education.

### Teachers' Perceptions towards Inclusive Education

Among seven regular education teachers, teacher leadership had no role in shaping their perception of inclusion. Although they agreed that inclusive education is essential for students with disabilities, they also contradicted this view by agreeing that students with disabilities belong to special education schools. They preferred a shallow involvement in supporting students with disabilities and regarded the additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods that these students need are beyond the job scope of the regular teachers, or beyond the provisions of a regular school. According to Florian (2019), these views are tautological as the appropriate educational response to disability. Without an awareness that the notion of inclusive education is rights-based and that equitable education includes students with disabilities, simply sending students with disabilities to special education schools will still contribute to exclusion and segregation. Past studies have established that factors attributed to teachers' reluctance to fully support students with disabilities include a lack of systematic understanding of the concept of inclusive education, understanding of disabilities, lack of support and clear guidelines, high workload, and most importantly, a lack of training to help regular education teachers learn more about students with disabilities in the regular education and inclusive classroom contexts (Yan et al., 2021). These factors could have been attributed to the teachers' very limited or no motivation to engage in teacher leadership in developing their knowledge of inclusive education. Therefore, it is not surprising that they showed contradicting views towards their support for inclusion and participation in the implementation of inclusive education.

Teachers' poor readiness level for inclusive education due to low competencies and inadequate support and resources has been evidenced by many past studies especially those from low-resource countries (e.g., Wapling, 2016). While engagement in teacher leadership would increase teachers' agency in building their knowledge, skills and resources, it is only when teachers are aware of their responsibilities to proactively collaborate and pursue professional development to develop skills and resources for inclusive education (Durias, 2010; Margolis, 2012; Muijs & Harris, 2006). Therefore, within the traditional hierarchical educational system in Guizhou, there first needs to be not only teacher training that aims to increase disability knowledge and skills but also well-designed, safe and accessible community of practice platforms for teachers to collaborate with each other (Lin et al., 2018; Wilson, 2016), particularly while the teachers were receiving in-service training. While training that enhances knowledge in disability and teaching promotes teachers' self-efficacy in implementing inclusive education (Xie & Zhang, 2022; Xie et al., 2022) and reduces the stigma on a disability (Low et al., 2021), training that equips teachers with the ability to develop productive collaboration among their colleagues and actively pursue their own professional growth promote teacher leadership (Hunzicker, 2013).

**Support for Students with Disabilities**

The teachers' inadequate understanding of disabilities is interrelated with their understanding of inclusive education. They were able to only vaguely identify visible disabilities such as physical disability, behavioural differences, and prominent learning difficulties but appeared unaware of invisible or hidden disabilities that are also common in the secondary classroom. These invisible disabilities may include a wide range of communication disorders and other learning needs, such as specific learning difficulties or communication disorders, that have been reported to have a prevalence of 30% in the classroom (McLeod & McKinnon, 2010). In our study, participants' perception that there were very few students with disabilities in their schools could be inaccurate due to their lack of understanding of invisible disabilities. Consequently, their misperception could result in neglect of learning access for these students. Both visible and invisible disabilities in the classroom should be regarded as "the norm rather than the exception" (Goidsenhoven et al., 2022, p. 80), but this awareness was lacking among the teacher participants.

To mobilise proper pedagogical support for students with disabilities in the classroom in low-resource provinces like Guizhou, there is an urgent need for awareness raising and competency development among policymakers and teachers in China. However, we argue that merely providing teachers with guidelines and disability training programmes will not be sufficient to transform teachers into agents of inclusion and social justice in the hierarchical Chinese system and culture. The training needs to include elements that encourage the transformation of mindset change that can be achieved through teachers' routines such as lesson planning and professional learning that involves changing instructional practices and pedagogical approaches, either on their own or with their colleagues, initiating new programmes or connected the school with external programmes, and collegiality, collaborating with their colleagues, and supporting colleagues' well-being (Pantić et al.,

2021), which could be expedited through the enactment of teacher leadership. As teachers are also the direct observers of students' behaviours, they can enhance their capacity to include students with disabilities as part of their regular teaching routines through peer discussion about their students' needs, teaching strategies and resource development.

## Teacher Leadership for Inclusive Education

Overall, there is a lack of teacher leadership in driving the implementation of support for students with disabilities among the teachers of this study. All participants agreed unanimously that subject teachers did not have to hold any roles in leading support for students with disabilities unless the role formally resided in their job description. Without a formal leadership role, the teachers in this study regarded themselves as incompetent to transform into inclusive teachers through their own initiatives. Wang and Ho (2018) asserted that in a Confucian and hierarchical society, Chinese leaders represent a high level of authority, so leaders with formal roles are more salient and may inhibit "those who are considered informal teacher leaders from practising leadership" (p. 308). By adopting only a top-down leadership model, the ongoing reform for inclusive education in China can be inhibited if teachers continue to perceive the local authority as the only powerful and dominant agent, and teachers with lower authorities can only rely on orders from above (Deng & Guo, 2007), a phenomenon that is consistent with the findings from other top-down management contexts, such as in other East Asia countries (e.g., Hallinger et al., 2005).

Although the teachers argued that the provision of support does not lie within their role, they were willing to collaborate with teachers who possess formal leadership roles and envisioned all teachers as being able to influence society to support students with disabilities. However, the teachers were more concerned about work-related barriers such as a lack of systematic guidance to support students with disabilities, heavy workload due to the large class sizes, and high emphasis on exam performance, than the lack of collegiality for instructional changes. The barriers that this study's subject teachers faced were also shared by the RRTs in Xie, Deng, et al.'s (2021) study. While the teacher participants of this study viewed these challenges as only resolvable by authorities from the top, the plausibility of reducing workload through resource sharing with other teachers was not part of their practices. The collaboration and interaction between teacher leaders and their peers could be seen as an essential facet of teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Nguyen et al.'s (2020) review of teacher leadership studies published between 2003 and 2017 demonstrated that the enactment of teacher leadership is augmented by a supportive and collaborative school culture, transparent and flexible school structure that recognises and values teachers' contribution, a principal who is supportive of teacher leadership, and supportive peer relationship among teachers, all of which, we propose, could be cultivated through opportunities to engage in professional communities of practice (Lin et al., 2018; Wilson, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

This study endeavoured to initiate an empirical investigation into Chinese regular education teachers' involvement in the provision of support for students with disabilities, and if their involvement included any practices of teacher leadership. Our analysis points towards an unbending relationship among the following factors:

1. A lack of knowledge of disabilities and inclusive education.

2. A severe lack of training to develop knowledge about inclusive education, inclusive practices, and disabilities.

3. A strong reliance on a hierarchical leadership system for provision of resources and training.

4. A lack of teacher collaboration to promote knowledge expansion among themselves.

We reckon that if teacher leadership could indeed mobilise teacher agency for inclusive education in Guizhou or other similar low-resource highly centralised educational systems, there first needs to external support to build teacher leadership among these teachers. Instead of relying on the development and strengthening of policies by the formal authorities, we recommend teachers at the grassroots level develop professional learning community (PLC) platforms that support awareness building, knowledge development and resource sharing, to address the needs of students with disabilities and diversity in their classrooms. PLCs can be broadly regarded as a "social space" (Hairon et al., 2015, p. 163) for teachers to collectively learn and improve knowledge and skills. The PLCs will have to provide competency development not just for inclusive education, but also explicit guidance for teachers to learn about teacher leadership and structures for teachers to enact teacher leadership. We also recommend that these PLCs be endorsed by the local authority so that the teachers' participation in teacher leadership activities is recognised. Prenger et al. (2019) found that 23 PLCs in the Dutch context generated moderate positive effects on teachers' satisfaction with their engagement, knowledge, skills and attitude development, and their application of practices.

This study contains limitations that can be addressed in future studies. Firstly, the data were collected from merely subject teachers who only represented a small sample of the total population of in-service teachers in Guizhou. Although the snowball sampling method adopted in this study facilitated participant recruitment, we acknowledge its limitations in potentially causing participant selection bias (i.e., participants of the same beliefs and experiences) and in generalisability (Noy, 2008; Patton, 2014). There is a need to triangulate the subject teachers' perspectives with teachers of other roles such as headteachers, middle-level teachers, RTTs, and special needs teachers, as well as with parents and students with disabilities. Secondly, the participants were all from Guizhou Province in China. A comparative study of teachers from different provinces in China

will yield a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of LRC and the impact of socioeconomic development on teachers' understanding of inclusive policies and practices.

Finally, given the shortage of support and training, regular education teachers' participation in leadership roles that promote knowledge inquisition and instructional changes for inclusive education and teacher leadership is in urgent demand in China. As long as regular education teachers are better educated and trained, and given guidance to engage in teacher leadership activities that are willing to be the agents of inclusion and social justice, the extent of negative attitudes towards disabilities will lessen.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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## APPENDIX

### Short Questionnaire About Participants Background Information

Please respond to the following questions by ticking the box that corresponds with the most appropriate answer that applies to you.

1. Your gender

☐ Female         ☐ Male          ☐ Others

2. Your age is _____

3. What is your highest level of qualification?

☐ Bachelor's degree          ☐ Master's degree          ☐ Doctorate degree

Others (Please mention) _____

4. Professional training you received:

☐ None                                   ☐ Master of Education

☐ Bachelor of Education                  ☐ Teacher Qualification Certificate

5. What is your school type?

☐ Private school          ☐ Public school

6. How long have you been in the teaching profession?

_____ years

7. Do you have any knowledge about inclusion education?

☐ Yes                    ☐ No

8. Do you have any in-service training about inclusion education?

☐ Yes                    ☐ No

**Interview questions**

1. What is/are your role(s) and scope of work in school? Please describe.

2. Do/does your role(s) and scope of work, in any way, involve students with disabilities? Please describe.

3. What is your understanding of the term inclusive education or "Sui ban jiu du" in Mandarin?

(Provides an explanation about inclusive education to the participants)

4. At your school, who leads and support students with disabilities?

5. What about the rest of the teachers and administrators? Are they responsible for supporting students with disabilities?

6. Who are the students with disabilities in your classroom? Please describe.

(Follow-up questions: What can they achieve in your classroom? What do they find difficult in your classroom?)

7. In your opinion, do you think the current support provision in your school is sufficient? Why? If not, how can the current support provision be improved?

8. Have you had any knowledge or training in teaching students with disabilities?

9. In your opinion, who should support your training on students with disabilities and inclusive education, or how would you want your training to be supported for?

10. In your opinion, is it important or necessary for regular education teachers to learn about inclusive education? Why?

11. As a teacher, what would you like to do when it comes to supporting your students with disabilities? Do you think teachers should take the initiative to lead support for students with disabilities? Please describe.

12. Are there any other comments that you would like to add?