

# EDUCATIONAL PLACEMENT OF SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN CHINA

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## **Abstract**

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder, characterized by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication and restricted and repetitive behavior. With increasing number of school-age children with autism in China, regular schools refuse to accept them due to the lack of professional services and resources. This caused some children with autism drop out of school, some even commit suicide. As a result, where to place them and how to provide appropriate education becomes one of the focus points of special education academe in China. Chinese government has put forward Special Education Promotion Plan (2014-2016) in 2014, which clearly encourages to establish specific special schools (departments) for children and adolescents with autism. This paper reviews the development of educational placement for children with autism internationally, then draws a conclusion that developed countries are trying to provide diverse educational placement options (including special schools, regular schools, special classrooms in regular schools, as well as providing home services) to meet the complex educational needs of children with autism. This paper also discusses the feasibility to establish special schools for children with autism and explicitly point out that as one of the diverse educational placement, the purpose of special schools of children with autism is to satisfy the diverse educational needs of severe and moderate children with autism with low functioning. In the end, this study provides suggestions in improving diverse educational placement for children with autism in China.

**Keywords:** school-aged, children with autism, educational placement

## **Introduction**

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder, characterized by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication and restricted and repetitive behavior. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in United States, the data shows that incidence of autism has increased to 68:1. And studies in Asia, Europe, and North America have identified individuals with ASD with an average prevalence of about 1% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). There is no doubt that this had been considered a low incidence of disability types, but today it becomes the most widespread and high incidence of developmental disorders, far more than cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined (Geraghty, Depasquale, & Lane, 2010). With increasing number of school-age children with autism in China, regular schools refuse to accept them due to the lack of professional services and resources. This caused some children with autism drop out of school, some even commit suicide. As a result, where to place them and how to provide appropriate education becomes one of the focus points of special education academe in China. Chinese government has put forward Special Education Promotion Plan (2014-2016) in 2014, which clearly encourages establish specific special schools (departments) for children and adolescents with autism, which firstly broke the tradition special education schools-building patterns for deaf, blind, and mental disorder. Under the world trend of inclusive education, building specific special schools for children with autism appears to run counter to inclusion, which aroused attention in our country. This paper reviews the development of educational placement for children with autism internationally, then draws a conclusion that developed countries are trying to provide diverse educational placement options to meet the complex educational needs of children with autism. This paper also discusses the feasibility to establish special schools for children with autism and explicitly point out that as one of the diverse educational placement, the purpose of special schools of children with autism is to satisfy the diverse educational needs of severe and moderate children with autism with low functioning. In the end, this study provides suggestions in improving diverse educational placement for children with autism in China.

## **Diverse educational placement of school-aged children abroad**

Since Kanner doctor proposes the concept of autism in 1943, it has been more than 70-year history. During this time, the debate of accreditation standard, performance characteristics of autism and how to carry out education and training have never interrupted. Medicine, genetics, pathology, Brain Science and special education put a lot of research funds to seek the causes, and exploring evidence-based practices for intervention, meanwhile educational placement of school-aged children with autism has come from isolated form to isolation and inclusion placement form, which shows the diverse educational placement system.

Before 1990s, the school-aged autistic children are placed in isolated environments, such as welfare, specifically raising mechanism. During this period, doctors or psychiatrists are responsible for the diagnosis of children with autism (Scott, Clark, & Brady, 1999), and they have the absolute right of disposal, who often thought that these

children are not educated, therefore there is lacking of corresponding education and intervention for them. In addition, the medical community proposed "refrigerator mother" theory, which means that autism is attributed to parents of lacking of care and love, indifference. Parents face a double pressure, not only invest time and effort taking care of autistic children, but also face accusations of outside (Laura, 2013). However, due to the lack of professional training in conservation, the parent does not know how to educate children with autism. In the end, parents had no choice but to place their children in isolated environments, such as large institutions and child psychiatric ward (Schreibman, 2013), or schools especially for children with emotional disorders (Mesibov, Shea, Schopler, 2014), where to accept treatment and intervention.

First to attach importance to education of autistic children are developed countries such as the United States and Britain. United States government published the individuals with Disabilities Education Act, including children with disabilities in public schools in 1975. According to the principle of the least restrictive, establishing a waterfall of educational placement system offers a variety of placement for autistic children. But because it does not refer that autistic children must be educated in the regular classrooms, there are a few common school willing to accept students with autism (Middleton, 2005). In the United Kingdom, autistic children also learned in special schools, special classes and other isolated environment, and only a few autistic children have access to public schools. Until 1980s, with the gradual promotion of inclusive education, public admission of children with developmental disabilities, including autism attending school then started to increase. United States government put forward the individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990, which promulgated determining autism became the category of disability, and need to receive special education services in the least restrictive environment (Laura, 2013), at that time autistic children were truly integrated into regular schools. In 2002, Department for Education and Skills in UK published Autistic spectrum disorders: good practice guidance, pointed out that most autistic children are placed in regular schools, and provided varying degrees of support for them (Department for Education and Skills, Department of Health, 2002). In the 2006-2007 school years, Japan firstly officially indicated autism is one type of disability, providing inclusive education services for them in the 2007-2008 school years (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2006).

Although inclusion has become a trend of educational placement for children with autism, but whether the autistic children to receive education in regular schools is still remains highly controversial. Many scholars support the form of integration. Carter found that autistic children can better integration in the regular classroom, and be accepted to peers (Carter, 1999). Koegel found that in the inclusive environment, autistic children can learn age-appropriate behavior from peers more effective (Koegel & Koegel, 1995). In addition, Lyons thought that, in inclusive environment children with autism will develop higher levels of social interaction skills, and have more friends (Lyons, Cappadocia, & Weiss, 2011). Schenkoske believed that, in the regular class autistic children can use self-management approach to improve problem behaviors and

increased attention effectively (Schenkoske, 2012). In addition, Simpson and Myles's research showed that inclusive education placement will allow children with autism make choices on diverse courses, enhance acquisition and generalization of academic skills (Simpson, Myles, 1998). However, in fact, inclusive education have difficulties to implement, some are opposed to inclusion. Carnahan's study found that, in traditional class teachers often use English to teach, which against advantage of visual learning style of children with autism, makes it difficult for autistic children to participate (Carnahan, 2006). Some regular schools teachers thought they are unable to provide effective education and services in inclusive environment because of social communication defects and aggressive behavior of children with autism (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008). Some scholars support isolated environment such as special school. They insist special school can provide intensive intervention, systematic and individualized teaching and specifically organized courses based on the characteristic of children with autism (Harrower, 1999). Meanwhile special teachers can use real-time records during teaching process to monitor performance level of students and then adjust teaching, and input more of energy for teaching reflection, and complete various long short-term individualized goals. Marks's research suggests that only a more structured educational environment could meet the educational and social needs of students, and specific special education could satisfy the developmental needs and academic achievement of students (Marks, 2007). Ichikawa found that using one-on-one structured teaching to high functioning autistic children will increase adaptive behaviors, improve parent-child interaction and reduce parents' stress levels (Ichikawa et., 2013). White make structured interviews to 101 children with autism aged 8-16, arguing that autistic children with low level of awareness and poor social skills should be placed in special schools, special classes or part-time in special classes (White, Scahill, Klin, Koeing, & Volkmar, 2007).

Although the debating of inclusion or isolation still continues today, but it is undeniable that many countries are trying to provide diverse educational placement forms to meet the educational needs of children with autism. As United States 2012 data displayed, in 2011-2012 school years only 36% of children with autism had 80-100% of time in general class, 18% of autistic students had 40-79% of time in general class, 36% of alone autistic students had only 0-39% of time in general class, and 10% of alone autistic students is completely in isolated environment (U.S. Department of Education. Data accountability center, 2012). These isolated environments mainly refer to autism intervention agencies and schools that government is approval qualified, or private or charitable foundation founded, and some organizations and individuals also provide home services. Many parents would like their autistic children to learning in general classroom, and at the same time they also want children accept intensive intervention in the specialized agencies. In UK, most of the autistic children are in general schools, others are in special schools as well as professional organizations such as the free school which founded by United Kingdom Autism Association; and there are a few private institutions, such as schools for children with emotional behavior disorder and severe learning disabilities, and schools specific for autistic children (Wing, 2008). While in

Spain, Finland, France and other European countries, there are highly specialized special schools and general schools. In Singapore, autistic students are often placed in special schools, special school specific for autistic children, and general school (Ministry of Education. List of SPED Schools, special education in Singapore, education system). In Japan, when autistic children are six years old, in accordance with the psychiatrist of the child specialist and rehabilitation institutions or local government-related recommendations of evaluation of IQ and behaviors, they are placed in regular classes, special classes, or special classes or special support schools that the local government specially created for the handicapped in from (深圳市自闭症研究会, 2013). In Korea, autistic students are often placed in special school and general school (Lee, 2011). Most autistic children are in special schools, along with the children with mental disorder in Pakistan (Suhail, & Zafar, 2008).

After 30 years' exploration of the educational placement for children with autism, many countries provide educational placement forms in order to meet the diverse educational needs for them, finally resulting in diverse educational placement system, due to the varying degrees of social communication disorder and stereotypic behavior of children with autism. There is not an education placement form appropriate for every child with autism, so we should provide education placement forms that are diverse, selective, suitable, benefited, and consistent with their wishes for children with autism.

### **Educational placement of school-aged children in China**

The Report on Children with Autism in China, issued on October 2014, displays that children with autism in China could amount to over 10 million, while 0-14 group may exceed 2 million (新华公益, 2014). Faced with such a large group of stark differences between individuals with autism, China has been exploring the appropriate educational placement form. Since 1994, the domestic public special schools have set up some autism training center classes, such as Haidian District Mental Retardation School, Fengtai District Mental Retardation School, as well as non-government institutions such as Stars and Rain Institute for Education, providing education for children with autism, intervention and training (李慧聆, 1997). However, National Autism Research is just at an early stage, mostly on autistic children's exploration of the diagnosis, etiology, treatment and other advances in medicine. For intervention in autistic children, it just starts some primarily sensory training and sports training (王梅, 1994). For some parents, teachers in special schools for the mentally disabled, deaf or blind children, unable to meet the educational needs of children with autism. At this point, our teaching strategies and interventions for children with autism are mostly foreign. Domestic procedures for special education teachers are not standardized. The prognosis is less effect (王梅, 2004). In addition, little relevant professional teacher training in autism is provided in mainland China, resulting in the shortage of professionals. Therefore, some parents spontaneously build up of education and training institutions for autism, trying to provide intensive appropriate one-on-one intervention for autistic children with some foreign advanced intervention methods such as Applied Behavior Analysis. To parents' satisfaction, the effect is better in the short term. However, costs for institutions of

intervention is too expensive for general family, and researches showed that children placed in isolated environment would have more challenging behavior and barely promote their social skills (Kawesk, 2011). So some parents tend to send children to regular school, but it is found that the quality of inclusive education is not satisfying. Regular schools cannot meet all educational needs of children with autism (魏轶兵, 卢珺, 谢明, 宗尽炎, 韦淑芹, 2006). Regular school teachers, students and parents of typical children know little about autism and lack of acceptance and corresponding professional skills. Moreover, lack of educational rehabilitation facility for autistic children leads to difficulties in the implementation of integrated education for children with autism (周思佳, 2011). Due to rejections of regular schools, high costs of agencies and other reasons, parents have to put children with autism in special schools, or have them receive training at home.

After entering the 21st century, right to education and the educational placement of children with autism have been ensured by legal form. The placement is diverse. In 2006, the Eleven-Five Rehabilitation Plan formally included autism as a type of mental disability, qualified for special education services. Meanwhile, the National Mental Health and Rehabilitation 'Eleven-Five' Plan set out 31 provincial-level pilot institutions to undertake rehabilitation training for children with autism. In 2011, the updated Regulations on the Implementation of Learning in Regular Class clearly identified children with autism are included in the project. A survey of 75 cases of autistic children in Jiangxi province in 2007 showed that half of them are enrolled in general kindergartens or primary schools, while children in special kindergartens or special schools takes up 24.2%. There is a minority of children did not attend any schools and institutions (刘莹, 2007). Shenzhen Autism Research Association has conducted a status survey on the services received by individuals with autism in South part of China lasting from April 2011 to late February 2012. It took back 988 copies of effective questionnaire from parents, among whom most of their kids are in rehabilitation center or institutions accepting treatment. About 13.8% are in special schools, 10.43% in general schools, while a small part of children accepting training at home (深圳市自闭症研究会, 2013). Surveys have also shown that 72.66% of parents think that children's educational placement need to be improved (深圳市自闭症研究会, 2013).

It is easy to see that advocates on educational placement and the right to education of children with autism, s are mainly the parents, from initially self-learning and building institutions to advocating for their children to receive general education. Although the Government has introduced a number of educational laws, encouraging diversity of form, but it is still unable to meet the growing needs of autistic children and their parents. The education for autistic children, however has not been significantly improved. Older autistic children who have received special intensive education and training still cannot achieve self-care, independence, and employment. Considering all these factors, in 2014 the Special Education Promotion Plan (2014-2016) clearly stated that we encourage qualified pilot construction of specific autistic school (department).

Some parents and teachers of general schools are supported to establish autism schools which may be more viewed as fostering agencies by parents, believing that when children entering school, they will no longer have to spend time and effort educating their children. They often have unrealistic expectations about autism schools and believe that these schools will solve all the problems of autistic children. In addition, some teachers in general schools who are unable to provide effective teaching autistic children tend to be annoyed. They think autism school to offer education for all school-age autistic children are appropriate and effective. Meanwhile, the opposition demands for autism are rising one after another. Some parents think autism schools are no different from institutions, but costs are borne by the State; and they still doubt the methods and effects of the education and intervention for children with autism. There were parents insisting that autistic children should attend general schools, without considering whether general schools can provide for effective educational support for children. In addition, domestic scholars generally agree that autism schools could not provide children with autism beneficial social environment, not in conformity with the trend of integration. It can be seen that on the one hand this policy for the educational placement of children with autism provides a new option, but it also increases the confusion of parents and educators, which may affect children with autism receiving appropriate forms of education and placement. Therefore, we need to clarify the different characteristics, such as the type and severity of autistic children, which indicates that the contents and form of education may be different, and parents should make rational decisions when confronted with diversified educational placement forms.

### **Providing diverse educational placement options to meet the complicated educational needs of children with autism**

As one type of disability, children with autism need to receive special education services and supports, including educational placement form which is the main site for autistic children receiving special education services. Through educational placement form development process of school-aged children with autism at home and abroad, we discovered that many countries are trying to take a variety of forms and diversified school subjects to meet the diverse educational needs of children with autism. Currently China school-age alone syndrome children education placed form is also mainly divided into three class: first class is specialization environment like alone syndrome school (Department) and the special school, which include special school to culture wisdom school mainly by particularly opening alone of alone syndrome class, special school of alone syndrome and other disability children (mainly wisdom barrier children) mixed class, and alone syndrome children school; second class is class attended form, including general school of general class, special class and resources classroom; third class is to send teachers to door, sometimes institutional training and sometimes professionals training at door. Different forms of educational placement is for different characteristics, such as the type and extent of autistic children, China should create a positive future and environment for the different needs of the educational placement of children with autism, enhance the quality of teaching, and create a teaching model adapting to our autistic children.

*Professional educational placement, such as specific autistic school (department) and special school*

Children who are in the specific autistic school (department) or special school are in the heavy degrees, general is low function alone syndrome children whose IQ is below or alone syndrome and other disability coexist of multiple disability children, this kind of alone syndrome children need highly structured physical environment, and integrated, and system, and intensive of education intervention with more discipline composition and multi-subjects assess provided by professionals. First of all, professionals are made up of multi-disciplinary specialized teachers, psychologists, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and health doctors. Secondly, comprehensive education is defined as education professionals to assess and develop individualized educational plans, and is equipped with Visual support, touch support, functional behavioral analysis, use of reinforcers, using a variety of individualized instruction, small group instruction, teaching, games and other forms of collective. In addition, teaching contents and teaching objectives are determined according to educational assessment, around the core of autism disorder (social communication and behavioral problems), with barriers (such as movement, sensation and perception, emotions, etc), as well as in various spheres of development (such as cognition, orientation, self-care, etc) to design. Finally, in addition to professional education, you also need the cooperation and participation of parents. For autistic children, and any educational intervention without parental involvement, are doomed to failure. Many studies have shown that parents into the intervention of children with autism, capable of delivering a good generalization effect. As Shubha and other human studies have found, through activities such as parent training, parent to implement intervention for autistic children in their daily lives, and generalization of autistic children is a good acquisition skills in school (Kashinath, Woods, & Goldstein, 2006). Some parents think more professional guidance will make autistic children may even benefit the family as a whole, so as to improve the quality of life of the entire family (Wang, Mannan, Poston, Turnbull, & Summers, 2004). Therefore, the Autism intervention schemes implemented in schools and special schools are not just limited to schools, but parents continue to intervene in natural scenarios. Autism school (Department) or special education schools need not only need and parental cooperation, joint assessment and instruction, but also for professional guidance and counselling services to the parents, it can help us to teach the knowledge and skills maintenance and generalization in the scenes outside the school.

*Inclusive educational placement*

Inclusive education placement choices in general school include three form, namely general class, special class and resources classroom, for children with high functioning autism whose IQ are general above 75. They accept professional consultation and remedy on academic, and learn social skills and rules during daily social interaction, to cover their core social defects. In addition, teachers also need to provide prevention and intervention services on behavior problems and emotional problems for autistic children. In foreign countries, these are often completed by behavior professional of the school



district, school counselors, and teachers in general and special schools. Parents need to help autistic children preview courses, generalize the intervention that teachers planned in their daily lives, and communicate with the teachers of the situation timely.

However, the inclusion of children with autism in China is worrying, because of lacking of specialized teachers, professional guidance, visual support teaching aids, and auxiliary support system. In addition, the fellow teachers and classmates generally insufficient, also the professionals and parents lacking of cooperation, so some autistic children in general schools did not have the desired effect. In 2011, researchers investigate 16 general school in Haizhu district of Guangzhou City, found that general children mostly take the negative attitude of neglect and exclusion to autistic students, more than 80% autistic students have few friends in class, few of participate in academic achievement, and most of the teachers did not develop individualized educational plan for them (周思佳, 2011). In addition, due to the disorders of autistic students as well as teachers' overlook, they are less involved in group activities, frequently doing some self-harm behavior, and aggressive behavior, and disrupt the class (周思佳, 2011). While general schools receives autistic children, they did not do some adjustment such as classroom environments, teaching, language development and social interaction guidance, eventually teachers rarely take into account the needs of autistic children. In September 2012, 19 parents wrote a joint letter in a primary school in Shenzhen, which forced a 15 year-old child with autism drop out of school. At the same year in Shenzhen, because of friction with classmates, a 9 year-old autistic students were forced to return home by school, he tried to escape from a window to go to school, unfortunately fell to death. Studies have also shown that access to general education services, autistic children' educational needs have not been satisfied (高健, 2005). Special Education Promotion Plan (2014-2016) in 2014, states that promote inclusive education, but at the same time it also declared provide a proper education for children with disability. In the Future, we should provide suitable inclusive education for autistic students, and general school needs to develop individualized educational plans, accordingly to adjust teaching goals, curriculum, teaching content and methods, then reduce classroom environment stimulus. Teachers combine class-based teaching system, group cooperation and individualized consultation to carry out teaching activities, and according to the educational needs for autistic children, teachers provide different degree of support, such as social interaction training, mind reading, academic consultation, and functional behavior analysis and intervention of problem behavior to help them integrated into the class and lessen the pressure of parents. In devoting more effort to promote and improve the implementation of inclusive education, at the same time we should provide education placement forms that are diverse, selective, suitable, benefited, and consistent with their wishes for children with autism.

#### *Delivery of education*

Providing delivery of education service is the children with extremely severe autism, or with severe complications such as epilepsy, or types of autism and other disorders, namely multiple disabilities in children. These children with autism are not suitable for

schools where the facilities and support is not perfect, we can make them take part in special schools or professional institute, and part-time professional training in household. This form is common in the United States, and Canada and other countries, and professionals provide indoor training in the organization. Since the last 1990s in China, professionals are generally in the form of tutoring door-to-door guidance, and their have the experiences training for autistic children in institutions. But their professional knowledge and skills are uneven, the educational assessment and intervention are not improved, so educational needs of children with autism may not have been satisfied. In addition, due to the poor cooperation between parents and professionals, parents are less involved in the intervention. In the future, delivery of education may become part of appropriate educational placement forms for severe autistic students, and the professionals should have a wealth of expertise, skills and literacy, and make data collection and assessment during intervention, and also has the ability to guide parents continue to intervene. In addition, medical personnel should give medical advice and health monitoring on a regular basis.

### **Conclusion**

All educational placement options providing for children with autism is to meet the diverse educational needs of children with autism, and to protect their basic right to education. However, through years of exploration, we found that there is not an appropriate option to meet the educational needs of all the children with autism. Based on the complexity and diversity of autistic children's characteristics, we need to provide diversified educational placement form to meet their educational needs. But due of lacking of specialized teachers, appropriate intervention techniques and supporting system, educational placement form did not meet the educational needs of children with autism. As China's population policy and environmental changes, number of autistic children in China and around the world are increasing, this has become the consensus of the medical community (LIU Ying, 2007) [35]. Education placement for different needs of autistic children meet their right to education is only the first step. Today we should not only focus on education placement, but also need to increase professional teachers training, establish corresponding of support guarantees system for substantive of advance, introduce advanced education experience and intervention technology abroad, meanwhile combined China reality situation vigorously carry out empirical research and avoid theory and practice disjointed, in order to provides suitable of education and intervention for children with autism in different education environment.

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