

Beyond the Quota, Cruel Optimism and the Politics of Inclusion in Taiwan's Elite Schools: A case study

Research Overview

Taiwan's recent inclusion reforms have introduced students with special needs into academically prestigious senior high schools through quota-based admission routes that run alongside competitive selection. This policy shift turns elite schools into a key site for examining how inclusion is narrated, contested, and operationalised within stratified educational fields.

Purpose of Study/Research Methods

Drawing on interviews with school leaders (n=2), teachers (n=20), parents (n=10), and mainstream students (n=30) in an elite senior high school, this article analyses how different stakeholders make sense of the presence and positioning of students with special needs, and what they believe inclusion is supposed to achieve.

Results and Discussion

Stakeholder accounts are sharply divided. Some frame the policy as an overdue intervention that broadens access and affirms schools' social responsibility. Others emphasise frictions produced when inclusive mandates meet elite academic cultures, including constrained support resources, intensified performance norms, increased teacher workload, and the risk that inclusion becomes an exhausting schooling experience for students expected to keep pace without adequate adjustment. Because direct interviews with students with special needs were not ethically feasible, the analysis focuses on representation, tracing how their interests are constructed and negotiated through the accounts of those who speak about them and often for them.

Theoretically, the article pairs Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism with scholarship on boundary work and symbolic boundaries. Cruel optimism illuminates how inclusion policy attaches students with special needs to promises of opportunity and belonging that are only partially sustained by the organisational and pedagogical conditions of elite schooling. Boundary work shows how stakeholders actively draw and police lines of merit, normality, and institutional fit, producing forms of conditional inclusion that preserve elite distinction even as schools comply with equity mandates. Empirically, the article

extends limited East Asian research on the intersection of special needs education and elite schooling. It concludes with implications for recalibrating Taiwan's admission regime and strengthening school level practices so that inclusion moves beyond symbolic compliance toward durable academic, social, and emotional support.