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Partnerships to Promote Inclusive Education for Students With Disabilities in Thailand

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Abstract

Inclusive education provides opportunities for students with disabilities to learn alongside peers without disabilities. In some countries, such as Thailand, a dearth of opportunities for inclusive education means that students with disabilities are only offered enrollment in residential schools designed for students with disabilities. As a result, students are forced to leave their home communities to receive a public education. Inclusive education allows students to follow the same path as peers in their community, which benefits all parties. This qualitative pilot study featured interviews with stakeholders to better understand how schools can partner with regional entities to increase opportunities for inclusive education. Analysis of data led to the emergence of three themes. First, the partnership led to an increase in collaboration, both between the school and outside agencies as well as within the school itself. Second, as many teachers did not receive instruction on developing inclusive classrooms while completing their teacher education programs, the coaching and mentoring delivered through the partnership was critical. Third, in order to ensure that the content of the training was meaningful and relevant, the delivery of services on-site in the school was identified by interviewees as essential. In addition to presentation of these findings, this paper includes a discussion of these findings, including implications for practice and future research.

Keywords: Asia, collaboration, coaching, mentoring, special education

Introduction

In many parts of the world, students with disabilities are educated in segregated schools that do not allow opportunities to engage with peers without disabilities (World Health Organization, 2011). Because these specialized schooling options may not be available in all communities, children with disabilities must leave their homes and families to attend these specialized schools. As a result, many students with disabilities and their families are forced to choose between receiving an education and engaging with their local community. In addition, being removed from their own community promotes a sense of *othering*, which further ostracizes these individuals from their peers, making it difficult to become genuine working members of their community (Lalvani, 2013).

Inclusive education is based on the concept that education should be provided to all children regardless of their abilities, with community involvement in developing children with special needs individually. A key foundational element for the global movement towards inclusive education was

the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which went beyond recommending education for all citizens of the world, regardless of ability or disability, by noting that these services should take place alongside peers without disabilities. Specifically, the Salamanca Statement recommended that governments of the world (a) develop policy and allocate funds to support inclusive education, (b) support demonstration schools within their countries and engage in exchanges with other countries, (c) provide a voice in the process for individuals with disabilities and their supporting organizations, (d) explore opportunities for early intervention and vocational services for students with disabilities, and (e) include training in the delivery of inclusive education to pre- and in-service teachers. However, many barriers to inclusive education prevent students with disabilities from participating in their local schools and communities. Countries who continue to experience these struggles recommended in the Salamanca Statement, such as Thailand, are working to develop strategies to promote inclusive schooling, thus allowing students with disabilities to remain in their home community and learn alongside their peers.

Inclusive Education

The idea of inclusion for individuals with disabilities is rooted in human rights and social justice, acknowledging that all people should have the same opportunities to be valued members of their communities. In the field of education, inclusion generally refers to the involvement of individuals with disabilities in educational activities alongside their peers without disabilities. Rather than focusing on specific physical placement, inclusion is a philosophy that involves a sense of belonging for an entire school community (McLeskey et al., 2017).

The concept of inclusive schooling is supported by both philosophical and empirical literature. In a philosophical sense, one of the most significant benefits of inclusion involves normalization (Wolfensberger, 1972). When individuals with disabilities are separated from their same-age peers during school-aged years, they are not provided with the same opportunities to be part of either their school community, nor the larger community in which they live (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018). Separate schools for students with disabilities can lead to lifelong perceptions of being less valuable or pitied by others; inclusion leads to increased societal expectations and opportunities to be viewed as respected community members (McLeskey et al., 2017). Empirical research has identified potential benefits to learning in inclusive environments rather than segregated classrooms, which Salend (2016) summarizes as: (a) increased academic benefits for students with disabilities when teachers utilize effective practices; (b) improved social-related outcomes for students with disabilities, including behavior, friendship, and self-concept; and (c) positive academic and social outcomes for peers without disabilities. Shogren et al. (2015) found that peers without disabilities appreciate and value the opportunities associated with attending a school that features inclusive classrooms.

The promotion of opportunities for inclusive education is a worldwide effort. Following in the footsteps of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD; United Nations, 2006) includes content related to inclusion. Article 3 states: “The principles of the present Convention shall be...full and effective participation and inclusion in society and equality of opportunity” (United Nations, 2006, p. 5). More specifically related to education, Article 24 of the CRPD states that governments shall provide services to ensure that “persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they

live,” which, among other provisions are “consistent with the goal of full inclusion” (United Nations, 2006, p. 5).

Inclusive Education in Thailand

The call for inclusive education was included in the CRPD (United Nations, 2006), however the idea of inclusion is still primarily a Western concept (Sharma et al., 2013). Thailand’s hosting of the World Conference on Education for All in 1990 was a springboard for inclusive education in the country (Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013). The resulting Jomtien Declaration recognized education for all as “an attainable goal” (United Nations, 1990, p. 2) across all nations. Although the conference proceedings are generally focused on education for all children across society, there is specific mention of students with disabilities. Article III acknowledges that “steps need to be taken to provide equal access to education to every category of disabled persons as an integral part of the education system” (United Nations, 1990, p. 5). Since the Jomtien Declaration, Thailand has ratified numerous pieces of legislation to promote inclusive schools. However, these regulations have not been well-enforced, and as such, widespread inclusive education has not become part of the educational landscape (Kaur et al., 2016; Kosuwan et al., 2014).

One of the most significant barriers to inclusive education in developing countries is insufficient teacher preparedness (Sharma et al., 2013). Thailand is no different; the lack of trained school personnel has been identified as a hindrance to the development of inclusive schools (Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013; Kosuwan et al., 2014; Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014). Without having qualified personnel to advocate for inclusive schools and implement instruction that promotes inclusion, schools struggle to provide adequate services that allow students with disabilities to learn alongside their peers without disabilities (Salend, 2016).

School-related barriers to the development of truly inclusive schools in Thailand include:

- a) lack of school staffing;
- b) a dearth of qualified special educators;
- c) the inability of general education teachers to modify curricular content, due to time or lack of knowledge;
- d) large class sizes;
- e) unawareness of effective use of assistive technologies;
- f) low levels of government funding;
- g) screening and assessment practices;
- h) poorly developed individualized education plans;
- i) lack of collaboration, both within the school and between the school and other entities; and
- j) a general lack of training across all levels of school-based staff (Kosuwan et al., 2014; Sukbunpant et al., 2013; Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014).

It is also important to note that Thai school leaders may be reluctant to enroll students with disabilities because it may lower the school-wide performance scores on national exams, thus damaging public perception of the school (Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014).

In addition to these barriers, elements of Thai society may contribute to hindrances in the development of inclusive learning opportunities for students with disabilities. Vorapanya and Dunlap (2014) note that many Thai people may view a child’s disability as the result of punishment

for a family's wrongdoing, a belief associated with Buddhist thinking. As such, individuals who experience disability are immediately ascribed lower social status and can be a source of shame for an entire family. The adoption of the Western model of inclusive education has been significantly hindered by these societal beliefs (Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014).

Framework for Inclusive Education in Thailand

To address these barriers, inclusive education for children with special needs in Thailand has been guided by a framework that is focused on Students, Environment, Activity, and Tools (SEAT; Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014). Including students at the beginning of SEAT is not a coincidence; students, both with and without disabilities are at the core of inclusive education. The environment plays a significant role to the extent to which inclusion is successful. This refers to the physical, social, and philosophical environment of a school and community. Appropriate and meaningful activity drives curriculum in the inclusive classroom. This includes but is not limited to individualized education programs, assessment, teaching methods, community-based instruction, quality control, collaboration, training, coaching, mentoring, and progress monitoring. Teachers require adequate tools to lead an inclusive classroom. This may include physical tools (e.g. technology, facilities, sufficient budget), but also less tangible items such as vision, law, and support (Chonthanont, 2003).

Although special education schools exist throughout Thailand, not every province offers these services (Kosuwan et al., 2014). As such, these schools have residential offerings for students who live geographically far away. Because of this, many students are forced to leave their home communities in order to attend school. This may be compounded by the fact that many of these schools are designed to teach and train students with a specific disability, meaning that students may need to travel even farther from home to be enrolled in a school that meets their needs. Also, because many of the special education schools are designed for one type of disability, opportunities for inclusion are especially limited. The lack of opportunities to grow and develop in their own community leads to additional disability-related stigma and causes students and families to experience loneliness (Viriyangkura, 2010). With this in mind, efforts are being made to promote inclusion in local community schools in Thailand (Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014).

Collaboration is a key component of this inclusive framework; it is a hallmark of inclusive education around the world, including Thailand. Recognizing the importance of collaboration, the authors of the Jomtien Declaration included *Strengthening Partnerships* as one of the seven action items necessary to meet the basic learning needs of learners around the world (United Nations, 1990). As such, this pilot study sought to better understand how working with outside agencies can support inclusive education efforts in Thailand by answering the research question: What are the critical components of a local collaborative organization that supports inclusive education for students with disabilities?

Methods

Participants

In order to explore the research question, a total of 24 participants from a province in northern Thailand were purposefully selected to engage in interview that focused on inclusive education in schools. Each individual was involved in supporting schooling that includes students with

disabilities. Of the 24 participants, 18 were employed by six individual inclusive schools; one administrator and two teachers from each inclusive school were interviewed. Of the six schools, five were inclusive (i.e., taught both students with disabilities as well as those without) primary schools located in a rural area (two smaller-sized school with populations less than 120 students and three larger schools that educational between 120 and 360 students). The sixth school was a combined primary and secondary inclusive school located in a small urban area that served over 360 students. In addition, six representatives from governmental disability support organizations were also interviewed. These individuals represented included three supervisors from regional educational service offices, one special education teacher from a specialized school, one clinical psychologist from a child development institute, and one university faculty member who had expertise in special education.

Materials

Interviews were conducted using a protocol featuring a series of questions related to inclusive education. The item most relevant to this topic included: (a) Please tell me about inclusive education in your school, (b) What knowledge and skills do teachers require in inclusive classrooms? (c) Have you undergone any course or training before being involved with children with disabilities? If so, please tell me the details, (d) Do you need any assistance and/or collaboration from your colleagues or principal regarding teaching children with a disability? (e) Has the school coordinated the cooperation in education for children with special needs with any organization? What is the nature of cooperation? and (f) How do you feel the expert team outreached to schools?

Research Design

Qualitative methods were selected to answer the research question. These methods are well aligned with the research question used in this study in that (a) little research has been done to understand the critical components of effective interagency collaboration to support inclusive schooling in Thailand, (b) importable variables were unknown, and (c) a hypothesis was not being tested (Creswell, 2014).

Procedures

In order to recruit participants, the researcher provided a letter from his university requesting cooperation in this research. Each of the 24 participants were interviewed individually by the first author. All interviews were conducted using the Thai language, which was the native language for each participant. The interviews took place in the schools or organizations in which the participant worked and were conducted using the aforementioned interview protocol. Each interview was conducted in a location that was quiet, free of distractions, and where the interviewee felt comfortable providing responses. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed for analysis after the interviews were conducted. After the data were analyzed, results were presented to participants as a member check to increase the credibility of the findings (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Data Analysis

Information gleaned from the interviews were analyzed to identify themes represented in the participant responses. After the interviews were transcribed, the qualitative software Atlas.ti was used to aid in the analysis of the data. The first author with expertise in inclusive education and

qualitative research conducted the analysis of the interview data. Through analyzing, synthesizing, and searching for patterns within the collected data, themes relating to the research question emerged.

Results

A qualitative study was conducted to better understand the critical components of a local collaborative organization that supports inclusive education for students with disabilities in Thailand. Three primary themes emerged from the data including: Collaboration; Coaching and Mentoring; and In-School Service Delivery.

Collaboration

Collaboration involves the coordination of all concerned organizations in managing education for children with special needs in their communities. Administrators of the related organizations specified a collaboration guideline as their policy to develop better inclusive education models in the future. This collaboration allows for recognition of genuine problems that impact the extent to which inclusive schooling can occur. Different entities, including schools and organizations involving in special educational for children with special needs have participated to develop a network of collaborators. Key components of the collaboration included:

- a) identification of clear objectives to provide recommendations and guidelines to participating parties;
- b) involvement of qualified, experienced, and trustworthy members representing a variety of areas (e.g., education, medicine, education leadership, faculty from institutions of higher education);
- c) assignment of clear responsibilities with a focus on exploiting their strengths to achieve the common goals; and
- d) development of a supportive atmosphere in which all parties are comfortable asking questions and open to giving and receiving guidance and support.

Each organization carried out its duties while meetings were held to share opinions, make agreements, draw up plans, and work together in accordance with one's expertise.

Participants described the value of collaboration at two levels: between the school and outside agencies as well as within the school itself. The partnership itself represented collaboration between the school and the support organizations; all stakeholders had a common mission that is beneficial to inclusive education for children with special needs. In addition, participants described an increased level of within-school collaboration. Personnel from the outside organizations helped to facilitate collaboration of staff members and between faculty and school administration. The internal collaboration network involved school administrators and teachers to provide education for children with special needs in the same direction as well as to support one another all the times.

One participant expressed praise for the collaborative relationship, saying:

[members of the collaborative team] were able to share our knowledge and experiences in educational management for children with special needs, learning from real experiences from the other mentors and participating teachers.

These collaborations led to the dissemination of knowledge that was able to support teachers in the inclusive school. The participant explained:

I was impressed by the support team to better understand the behaviors of these children, which corresponded to teachers' actual needs and was able to help them.

A school administrator described benefits of having an informal collaborative relationship with individuals with knowledge of disability and inclusive practices. This administrator explained:

If the school has made contact with the experts, if we go in formally, it may be slow, or we don't get the desired response, but if we are personally acquainted, we can get help easier and faster.

Coaching and Mentoring of Teachers

General education teachers and administrators from inclusive schools appreciated opportunities for coaching and mentoring to develop a classroom that is designed to support students with disabilities. Coaching and mentoring were used to enhance and develop teachers' knowledge, skills and personal characteristics in organizing learning activities. The process is designed to inspire the teachers to think and to be active member of their team. All the teachers were guided to share a unified vision. In addition, they were able to organize learning activities continuously and effectively. The individuals providing the coaching and mentoring not only provided guidance, but also encouraged teachers to analyze their strengths and weaknesses so that they were able deliver high-quality learning activities. Meanwhile, teachers were able to support colleagues by reflecting and sharing their experiences on how to organize learning activities in order to provide quality learning experiences for students. One teacher expressed the value of continued and ongoing coaching from experts in special education. They explained, "there are new special needs children attending school every year [and because of this we] must improve the individual education plan for children every academic year".

New administration systems have encouraged school personnel to think and change the teaching and learning for children with special needs. Teachers have begun to exchange their knowledge and their collaboration between one another has become stronger. The schools have learned how to work in a learning communities, such as the Professional Learning Community (PLC) and the Community of Practice. One general education teacher explained the benefits of these kinds of networks by noting, "you will be able to talk more easily as a PLC. Yes, the experts and teachers will exchange with each other." In order to learn best practices to support students with disabilities, teachers must be highly-skilled in learning management and be highly motivated. Continuing education from the concerned agencies will improve support to teachers and allow for increased inclusive learning opportunities.

In-School Service Delivery

Organizations that support education for children with special needs also provided outreach services in the schools. Participants explained that schools coordinated with these organizations to bring specialists to the schools to provide direct support. The schools organized educational programs for children with special needs by using expertise from specialists, including those with knowledge in classroom management, teaching children with special needs, and behavior management. The teachers were more confident in organizing teaching and learning activities that met the needs of students with disabilities because they were provided guidance on how to promote positive

behaviors in children. Proactive outreach to the school was also time saving and easier for teachers and children in meeting each specialist. Through this research project, the team of experienced lecturers came to the school and provided guidance in teaching and learning, and helped solve problems in real situations.

One participant described the benefits of providing in-school outreach, by noting that “solving problems that occur in real conditions makes the teacher feel warm and makes the teacher confident in teaching and learning”. Another teacher explained that one of the benefits of providing supports in the actual school setting allows the specialists to “see many realities in context... each school is not the same, the context of the teachers in each school will be different”. These in-school outreach services also help the specialist better understand the kinds of students the serves. One teacher noted, “some schools have only children with learning disabilities, some school have children with intelligence, behavior [disabilities]. This is the difference. I want the experts [to] come to find the truth. See more real conditions”.

Discussion

Although inclusive educational opportunities have benefits for all parties, many countries, including Thailand, have struggled to provide opportunities for students with disabilities to learn alongside their peers in the classroom. Collaboration between schools and other agencies who employ personnel with expertise in special education can be an effective strategy to promote inclusive learning opportunities. This qualitative pilot study sought to identify and better understand the critical components of these partnerships. Interviews from school staff and personnel from local and regional special education organizations lead to the identification for three primary themes. These include: Collaboration, Coaching and Mentoring, and In-School Service Delivery. Although these findings are a result of a pilot study, we believe they can be used to help guide inclusive education initiatives in Thailand, as well as other countries.

Theoretical Implications

It is perhaps not surprising that collaboration was identified as a critical component of these arrangements; collaboration is one of the main components of a plan to support inclusive education for children with special needs (Smith & Leonard, 2005). Kosuwan et al., 2014 describe collaboration as being “critical for the success of students and teachers” (p. 717) interested in promoting and facilitating inclusive education in Thailand. Loreman and his colleagues (2005) stated about collaboration for inclusive education that each organization must support inclusive education in a positive way and collaboration must facilitate the work of other organizations as well. Collaboration connects individuals or organizations with one’s resources, goals, members, opinions, problems, or similar needs to work or carry out activities together in order to solve their problems or to meet their needs based on mutual respect and equality (The Institute of Community Organization Development, 2009). In this study, it was revealed that strong collaboration took place among the mentor team; the participating schools; the researcher; and the school teachers and administrators. The teachers were satisfied with sharing experiences in solving problems of children with special needs. The experiences were shared between the mentor team and teachers, bringing about more awareness on and learning about these children and their needs.

The coaching, mentoring, and outreach provided by the outside agencies can play a large role in the development of inclusive schools. As Thailand has a limited history of offering inclusive schooling

(Kosuwan et al., 2014), many teachers and administrators may be unfamiliar with even the notion of instructing students with disabilities alongside their peers without disabilities. As a result, they likely do not have the knowledge or experience to understand classroom practices and strategies to lead and facilitate an inclusive classroom. A lack of teacher training has been identified in the literature as a significant barrier to inclusive schools in Thailand (Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013; Kosuwan et al., 2014; Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014). Support from outside entities who employ people knowledgeable about inclusive practices is essential.

An additional benefit of developing collaborative relationships with outside entities involves the potential to continue and maintain partnerships to provide ongoing support and training. Kosuwan et al. (2014) explained that rather than single training opportunities, school staff need continuous opportunities to develop skills. When relationships are developed through a partnership based on shared goals, involved entities may be more likely to continue working together. This collaboration can be utilized in transforming the role of an interested party to an engaged stakeholder; the latter of which will be more likely to maintain the ongoing support needed to make inclusive education a reality.

Practical Implications

Schools interested in further developing their inclusive class opportunities should consider reaching out to local and regional organizations that support individuals with disabilities. Along the same lines, disability support organizations interested in supporting inclusive schools should advocate for community stakeholders by seeking to advance opportunities in inclusive learning environments. These initial discussions can be the foundation for a collaborative relationship that may lead to inclusive learning opportunities that can benefit an entire community. Recognizing that a lack of knowledge and understanding is a barrier to pushing for inclusive educational opportunities, support organizations need to make it known that they are willing and able to offer aid to make inclusion a reality.

Kaewhawong (2003) described the essential components of a strong network, noting that the network must communicate on a regular basis, promote an exchange of information, and carry out development work continuously. Collaboration for wider support on goals, objectives, and operation plans should be taken into consideration. The process should facilitate shared exploitation of resources and be flexible to accommodate the circumstances. It should also promote decision making of and efficient communication among members. Each organization should establish a coordination agency to facilitate an exchange of experiences among members, to help reduce misunderstanding as well as dominance from an organization under the same collaboration network. Both these findings of this study and others (e.g. Kosuwan et al., 2014; Pow & Lai, 2021) suggest that networking can facilitate the development of a professional learning community.

In addition to collaboration between schools and outside organizations, successful opportunities for inclusive education will also require collaboration within the school. The internal collaboration network requires that school administrators and teachers provide uniform education for children with special needs, as well as support one another all the times. All school personnel should be involved in all the operation steps, ranging from thinking about and presenting problems and needs, planning, designing projects, implementing projects, assessing the operations to receiving benefits until an internal network is established. The findings of this research indicate that a strong school network will assist in enabling inclusive education to become successful.

Limitations and Future Research

Due to the relatively small sample size, limitation regarding generalization should be considered. Although the findings may be applicable to other parts of the world and other regions of Thailand, the findings may represent the unique characteristics of the area in Northern Thailand where this study was conducted. Different areas may have unique contexts related to understanding of special education and inclusive education. It is important to note that interviewees did not describe tensions involving collaboration, coaching, or mentoring. Although these likely exist, they were not discussed by participants for perhaps two reasons. First, Thai people often prefer to avoid conflict (Boonsathorn, 2007), which perhaps explains why there was no mention of these tensions. Second, as the study was exploratory, researchers did not ask a specific question about the existence of these tensions. Another limitation involves the data analysis. Although it would have been preferable to have two researchers complete the qualitative analysis, language barriers made this unfeasible. The interviews and transcriptions were in Thai, which is only spoken by the first author.

This pilot study has laid the foundation for more in-depth research involving inclusive education initiatives in Thailand. Future research should involve understanding the specific kinds of supports valued by school-based personnel interested in further developing an inclusive school community. The results of this study indicate that training and support from outside entities are a critical component of these collaborative relationships; however, better understanding the specific training topics would help guide these partnerships. Conducting a survey across schools in Thailand would glean valuable information in moving towards more inclusive classrooms across the country. Future research may also consider how specific strategies or frameworks, such as Universal Design for Learning, can impact a Thai classroom teacher's self-efficacy in instruction and openness to including students with disabilities in their classroom. As interviewees did not discuss barriers related to collaboration, coaching, or mentoring, future researchers might focus on exploring these items to better understand how partnerships may be developed.

Conclusion

Although inclusive education for students with disabilities is the law of the land in Thailand, it is rarely enforced. As a result, young people with disabilities are excluded from opportunities to follow educational pathways available to their non-disabled peers, which can lead to a lack of acceptance in the individual's own community. Inclusive schooling provides opportunities to normalize disability, leading to additional opportunity for individuals with disabilities and greater social acceptance by their peers. In order to support these inclusive practices, schools may consider collaborating with outside agencies, who employ people who have knowledge and expertise related to disability and inclusive educational practices. By offering collaboration, coaching and mentoring, and in-school support, schools may be able to provide the support to make inclusion a reality.

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