



Obstacles to Implementing Inclusive Primary Education Policy at Municipal Schools in Thailand

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative study for analyzing barriers to inclusive education policy implementation for students with learning disabilities at municipal primary schools in Thailand. Findings from face-to-face interviews with key informants and parents show that misunderstandings of school inclusion, negative attitudes of teachers, and little parental engagement limit the active learning opportunities of such students. The author recommends that mayors undertake a leading role in allocating sufficient resources to promote positive attitudes toward inclusive education at municipal primary schools, and explore alternative ways to increase parental involvement.

Keywords: Inclusive Education Policy, Disability Empowerment Policy, Local Governments and Disability

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อุปสรรคการนำนโยบายการศึกษาาร่วมระดับ ประถมศึกษาไปสู่การปฏิบัติในโรงเรียนเทศบาล ในประเทศไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอผลงานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพที่วิเคราะห์อุปสรรคที่มีต่อการนำนโยบายการศึกษาาร่วมไปสู่การปฏิบัติสำหรับนักเรียนที่มีความบกพร่องในการเรียนรู้ในโรงเรียนเทศบาล ในประเทศไทย ผลการศึกษาได้มาจากการสัมภาษณ์ตัวต่อตัวกับผู้ให้ข้อมูลหลักและผู้ปกครองชี้ให้เห็นว่าความเข้าใจที่คลาดเคลื่อนต่อระบบการศึกษาาร่วมในโรงเรียน ทักษะด้านลบของครู และการมีส่วนร่วมของผู้ปกครองที่น้อยเกินไปเป็นอุปสรรคที่จำกัดโอกาสในการเรียนรู้ของนักเรียนกลุ่มดังกล่าว นักวิจัยเสนอแนะให้นายกเทศมนตรีแสดงบทบาทผู้นำในการจัดสรรทรัพยากรที่เพียงพอเพื่อส่งเสริมทัศนคติทางบวกต่อการศึกษาร่วมในระดับโรงเรียนประถมศึกษาในสังกัด และสำรวจแนวทางเลือกอื่น ๆ เพื่อส่งเสริมการมีส่วนร่วมของผู้ปกครองให้มากขึ้น

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Introduction

Inclusive education is one of the most important tools to empower school-age children with disabilities (UNESCO, 2017/8). This article, therefore, aims to investigate the interaction between municipalities and inclusive education policy, as well as analyzing causes that affect the quality of inclusive education management at local levels. In doing so, the author casts light on municipal primary schools in Thailand and focuses on their current inclusive education management.

Accessibility to appropriate inclusive education is one of the most important tools in enabling people with disabilities to participate in wider communities. The right to education not only improves the self-esteem of people with disabilities, but also enhances their right to meaningful employment. Education for people with disabilities dates back to December 10, 1948 when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the United Nations. Since then, the right to education for people with disabilities has gained increasing importance (World Health Organization, 2011).

With the growing influence of the Declaration, much legal framework has been established in support of the empowerment of persons with disabilities through satisfactory education, e.g., the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1990 World Declaration of Education for All, the 1994 Salamanca Declaration, and the 2000 World Education Forum. Such international legal frameworks recognize the right of everyone to at least primary education, but none provides a clear statement on the right to inclusive education (de Beco, 2014).

UNICEF (2017) and UNESCO (2017/8) confirmed that inclusive education was a relevant socio-economic justification because it widened opportunities for students with disabilities to be included socially. A significant amount of research has also demonstrated that inclusive education helped those students become accustomed to participating in the wider community (Lindsay, 2007; Florian, 2015; Sailor, 2016).

The inclusive education concept stems from the World Declaration of Education for All in 1990 and the UNESCO Salamanca Statement in 1994. This concept introduced educational rights in schools, aiming to place children with disabilities into classrooms seamlessly. It seems, however, that these documents provided a broad framework on how to achieve inclusive education goals but possessed little guidance concerning discrimination clauses (de Beco, 2014).

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Because the prior international legal framework of disability rights did not provide any instruments or detailed guidance to protect the inclusive education rights of school-aged children with disabilities, the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are, therefore, education rights treaties that fill the large gap in the international education rights of people with disabilities. UNCRPD article 24 proclaimed inclusive education rights, stating that:

States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning ...

Article 24 of the UNCRPD accentuates the right of persons with disabilities to inclusive education. In realizing this right, signatories to the document shall ensure full inclusive education participation at all education levels, with reasonable accommodation and effective individualized support that maximizes full inclusion. Inclusive education, according to Article 24, provides opportunities for children with disabilities and those without to learn the value of an inclusive society and diversity through mainstream classrooms (Slee, 2011; Mitchell, 2014; Terzi, 2014).

In 2015, Article 24 of the UNCRPD was reaffirmed by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs: Goal 4). Sustainable Development Goal 4 ensures ‘*inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes life-long learning opportunities for all,*’ and includes a set of associated targets. It is, therefore, best argued that inclusive education is seen as an integral element of full socio-economic inclusion of students with disabilities. (UNICEF, 2016; Ruijs, 2017).

Inclusive education itself, however, has multiple meanings. Slee (2011) argued that inclusive education showed signs of confusion among practitioners and had been implemented in different ways. In 2013, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities confirmed that there was some confusion between inclusive education and integrated education in States Parties (United Nations, 2007). If they considered inclusive education for students with disabilities as a place to be accepted as full members, then students taught in mainstream classrooms might have less access to appropriate accommodation which might result in self-devaluation (Haug, 2010). The OECD (1999: 22) underlined the notion of inclusion:

Inclusion goes beyond the integrative idea of assimilating children with disabilities into the existing ordinary school system but it requires instead changes to the school system itself ...

Haug (2017) articulated that inclusive education practitioners such as policy shapers, school principals and school teachers might view inclusive education from two different perspectives—one as a place where students with disabilities could be full members in mainstream classes (integration), and another as the optimum place for learning with classmates (inclusion). He further explained that inclusive education practitioners should bring the two different perspectives together and give priority to locations where students with disabilities experienced the most appropriate environment for learning in line with a sense of belonging and well-being.

Inclusive education has led to divergent views when it comes to implementation. The success of education for children with disabilities, therefore, depends heavily on the knowledge of inclusive education and public awareness of rights to such education for persons with disabilities. Without comprehensive knowledge of inclusion, education policy shapers may introduce ‘integration’ in the guise of ‘*inclusion*’ (Ainscow et al., 2000; Norwich, 2014).

Despite growing international recognition of education rights for people with disabilities, realizing inclusive education as indicated in Article 24 of the UNCRPD and Sustainable Development Goal 4 is still difficult. Some countries in Asia have put a great emphasis on inclusive education; their efforts, however, have not been as productive as expected due to negative attitudes of teachers toward students with disabilities and insufficient staff support from policy-level personnel (Sharma et al., 2008; Deng & Poon-MacBrayer, 2012; Bentley-Williams & Morgan, 2013; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Ruijs, 2017).

In Thailand, the Thai government since 2008 has undertaken significant educational reforms and the Ministry of Education remains highly committed to inclusive education. Recognizing the strong influence of UNCRPD and SDGs, the government has substantially revised laws concerning education for children with disabilities.

One of the most significant acts of disability legislation is the Empowerment for Persons with Disabilities Act (2007). This law is the supporting framework for other organic laws concerning disability rights. In 2008, to facilitate inclusive education, the Ministry of Education promulgated the Education for Persons with Disabilities Act which provided technical support and budgets to implement an inclusive education policy. According to the Act, the government established the National Education for Persons with Disabilities Committee to supervise the Act's implementation and lay down practical guidelines for schools concerning effective implementation of inclusive education. Because of growing demand across the country, the central government devolved its inclusive primary education functions to local governments through the 1999 Decentralization Law, authorizing municipal primary schools to implement inclusive education in local communities. At local levels, translating inclusive education policy into practice has not been an easy task in Thailand. Adequate resource allocation together with appropriate training for disability policy makers, school principals, school teachers and parents is a key factor necessary for successful inclusive education (Kantavong et.al. 2012; Sukbunpant et.al, 2013; Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014; Kantavong, 2018).

In Thailand, there is scant literature concerning the role of local municipal primary schools in promoting inclusive education rights of young students with learning disabilities. It is therefore important for disability scholars to study local context-based inclusive education in municipal communities, and share their findings with international researchers in order to promote appropriate educational access for children with learning disabilities.

Without thorough studies, inclusive educational practices at municipal primary schools cannot be substantially or effectively modified. Hence, the aim of this article is to discuss current findings to understand inclusive education in the local context of Thailand from the perspectives of mayors, school principals, teachers, and parents.

Explaining methodology

The research reported in this article had two objectives. The first was to identify the attitudes of the four groups indicated above toward inclusive education at municipal primary schools in Thailand. The second was to investigate inclusive education practices at the school level with emphasis on how these four groups had responded to inclusive education.

Based on a qualitative approach, this article was derived from field research conducted from April 2017 to March 2019 in Thailand. It focused on municipal primary schools in three municipalities in the north, northeast, and south: Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, and Songkhla, respectively. Since primary education is the first step of schooling and a preparatory stage for young students with disabilities to pursue their inclusive experience at higher levels, the author selected municipal primary schools in the communities where they lived that suited research objectives. It should be noted that the schools in this study admitted students with learning disabilities only; children with other types of disability were sent to specific schools that can offer the relevant assistance (ramps for wheelchairs, etc.).

In this research, phenomenology was introduced to help the author delve into an individual's experience in inclusive education. Phenomenology is a philosophical inquiry launched by Edmund Husserl in 1900, explaining it as a novel way to describe the meaning of what was experienced and how it worked (Giorgi, et al, 2017). To date, it has been well-received among qualitative researchers who like to address the meaning of the interaction between an individual and things in the world (Laverty, 2003; Vagle, 2018). A phenomenological approach was thus used to fulfill the research objectives.

After reviewing key scholars in phenomenological approach, the author followed Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2007) to reveal the live experiences of respondents in inclusive education. Their approach best suited the school inclusion experience among respondents. Using this approach, the author described attitudes that hindered inclusive education policy implementation at the municipal school level and looked into the involvement of parents of students with learning disabilities. In order to generate raw data, a semi-structured interview technique was introduced to investigate respondent interactions and elicit appropriate data for analysis.

Ethical Issues

This research was ethically approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Ethical issues in this article included rigorous examination of interview questions by the IRB, informed consent from interviewees, and respect for their privacy. To better facilitate their consent, the purpose of the research, research questions, research process, time commitments, and research materials were explained to the interviewees. In addition, potential risks were explicitly discussed so that each participant could decide whether or not to participate. Subsequently, participants agreed to sign consent forms for the interviews.

Audio recordings, verbatim transcriptions, and other note-taking activities from interviews were stored as electronic files and were password-protected for the author's use only. Data was disassociated from participant names and other identifying information by using a unique numerical identifier. A key that matches participant names to their unique numbers was encrypted and stored separately from consent forms.

Selection of respondents

Municipalities located in large urban cities from the north, northeast, and south of Thailand were purposively selected, and only one municipality was selected from each region. Letters of Permission to Conduct Research approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) were sent to mayors of each municipality first. The letter, with consent forms, explained research objectives, data collection, and analysis. Having studied the criteria, the mayors suggested the author contact only one inclusive school in each municipal area. As a result, only three municipal schools at primary education level participated in this study. Again, letters were sent to school directors outlining the purpose of the research, participants' criteria, and inviting voluntary participation in the interview process. Since this article attempted to shed light on respondents' firsthand experiences of inclusive education practices at municipal primary schools, members of the four groups were given a chance to express their views through face-to-face interviews. After the author explained the purpose of this study, the selected participants agreed to be interviewed and signed the consent forms.

Each participant from the three municipalities was methodically selected. Criteria for the selection of participants included: (i) mayors currently in office, (ii) school principals who have implemented inclusive education for five years or more, (iii) school teachers who currently teach students with disabilities or those who have taught in inclusive classrooms for the past five years, (iv) parents whose children with disabilities have studied in an inclusive classroom at municipal schools for three years or more, and who have lived in the municipality for three years or more, and (v) those still living in these municipal areas at the time of the interviews.

School principals asked their teachers who met the criteria to offer their views. As students with learning disabilities in this article were at primary education level and below eighteen years of age, the author was prevented by the Child Protection Law from interviewing them directly. Their parents, therefore, were regarded as their sole representing voice.

For parent interviews, school principals selected from a student database the names of those who enrolled their children in inclusive classrooms: six parents from the school in Chiang Mai province, five parents from the school in Khon Kaen province, and eight parents from the school in Songkhla province. Subsequently, school principals invited them to meet with the author. After being informed of the research objectives, eleven parents agreed to give their responses-four each from Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen and three from Songkhla. In order to protect their privacy, biodata and names remain undisclosed.

Data Collection and Analysis

The author interviewed all participants owing to their small number. Interview questions were methodically constructed. A number of disability scholars and professional experts on inclusive education were asked to review the questions. Subsequently, revisions were made and the complete interview checklists were redesigned and classified into four groups: mayors, school principals, teachers, and parents. The revised interview questions were then approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Participants were asked a set of open-ended questions about their inclusive education experience. Each of the participants chose to be individually interviewed. The interviews were conducted twice at the municipal offices and schools. Each interview lasted for 60 minutes. The first interview was for raw data collection while the second was for participants' approval for verbatim transcription. All interviewees agreed with the method of tape recording, but no photographs were taken as they requested anonymity.

To avoid confusion with the local dialect, each interviewee was asked to speak standard Thai. Despite speaking Thai as a first language, the author employed two research assistants in order to avoid language miscommunication. Data and information were recorded by hand and on a recording device. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The transcribed information was coded within a structure of nodes. A rigorous analysis ensured that the key themes were accurately applied to the analysis. The responses were grouped by statements from each interviewee unless otherwise indicated. The results included the views of mayors, school principals, school teachers, and parents concerning inclusive education practices.

Trustworthiness of information

To ensure data accuracy and to eliminate potential research biases, non-participatory classroom observations and academic activities for students with disabilities were introduced to cross-check the data. In order to ensure factual accuracy in the transcription process, the author read the verbatim transcripts while listening to the recordings. In a second visit, the transcripts were given to the interviewees for their responses and approvals. Three parents requested that the author read the transcripts for them.

Results

The author studied the nodes to identify possible themes related by the interviewees. The results demonstrated central themes related to values and practices of inclusive education among participants. First, impressions of inclusive education among mayors were identified as the most meaningful school inclusion policy formulation. Second, it revealed participants' attitudes toward inclusive education values and practices. Third, it showed the influence of parental involvement in promoting school inclusion for their children with disabilities.

Inclusive education practices from mayoral responses

Since the promulgation of the Education for People with Disabilities Act (2008), the Thai government has promoted inclusive education throughout the country. At a local level, financially strong municipalities were tasked with formulating and implementing inclusive education policy in their municipal primary schools. The following are statements reflecting the mayors' differing viewpoints of inclusive education. One mayor said:

We understand that students with disabilities need schooling. The municipality is promoting educational rights; so, we welcome everyone, but we don't have a special room for students with disabilities. They must study with their friends.

In terms of their understanding of inclusive education, it appeared that mayors possessed only an academic achievement mindset when asked about its importance. One mayor said:

We have key performance indicators in education achievement at a school level, and we must educate our students with disabilities under a mainstream school environment and make them academically strong. Our education policy is to make sure that every student passes the national tests with satisfactory scores.

Another mayor added that:

The Ministry of Education has introduced strict quality assurance and national tests. Students must demonstrate their strong academic ability, basically above the average national test score. The higher, the better. With that, our schools will be given top scores in quality assessment.

Their immediate response regarding inclusive education management concerned a lack of resources. One mayor argued that:

We are supervising many schools. Funding is our major challenge. In order to make it convenient for us to manage, we adopt only one school to welcome students with learning disabilities. We have a thousand students in total. Unlike disability-specialized schools, we ask general teachers to volunteer for inclusive classrooms because we don't have a large enough budget to hire special education teachers.

Another mayor added:

We don't have any special classrooms for them (students with disabilities) in our schools. Our education budget within a fiscal year is not sufficient to run effective inclusive schools. It is expensive and parents of those children tend to be poor. We just do our best under resource constraints.

Responses indicated that mayors not only shed light on key performance indicators in academic achievement for students with learning disability, but also strongly argued that existing budget arrangements hindered the process of education for those students.

Inclusive education implementation from principals' perspectives

Because the notion of inclusive education is quite recent at municipalities and schools, neither mayors nor school principals appeared to understand its core concepts. The newness of the concepts has not only led to an erroneous impression of inclusive education management, but also insufficient institutional support for teachers involved with classroom inclusion. One school principal argued:

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We are not ready yet, but we have to abide by the mayor's directives. Students with disabilities who come to us have learning disabilities and their literacy is very low. We don't have a special class for them and must put them into a mainstream class. That's a problem.

Another principal added:

The mayor has chosen our school to be an inclusive primary school and his administration informally publicized this without asking if we were ready or not. Nobody knows how to run inclusive classrooms, but when it is a policy, we can't say "no" to the mayor and we can't say "no" to parents, either.

One principal commented candidly on inclusive education:

In reality, we don't want to admit these students with learning disabilities because their academic performance can't meet the desired national educational achievement. They just bring our school rank down every year. Their families' financial status is poor and their parents can't help them well at home. They just put their burden on the school. What can we do, then?

The responses received suggested that many schools were not well-equipped to implement inclusive education. The comments from school principals demonstrated that they had negative or uninformed attitudes toward classroom inclusion. The interviews indicated that there appeared to be no institutional support from mayors, nor have the school principals or teachers been trained to implement inclusive education at a primary school level, even though it is a mayoral policy that school principals must implement. While a number of school principals seemed to have negative attitudes toward school inclusion and/or lack sufficient knowledge of inclusive education, classroom teachers were left alone to face major challenges when teaching students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

Opinions of classroom teachers concerning inclusive education practices

In schools, principals asked teachers to voluntarily teach students with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. However, very few responded favorably to such requests. One volunteer math teacher argued that:

I am the youngest among math teachers in the school and I was tasked to teach students with learning disabilities. The school principal assigned me to handle classroom inclusion in Grades 4 and Grade 5. I felt ineffective when teaching students with learning disabilities mixed with the non-disabled. I did my degree in math, not special education.

A social studies teacher who teaches grade 6 described her experience in an inclusive classroom. She mentioned that it was difficult to teach in such an environment:

Social studies could possibly spur student interest. Updated teaching and learning materials should have been provided. I think every subject needs new teaching and learning materials for special-needs students. But our school receives very small budgets each year. With those problems, I am reluctant to teach them.

One Thai language teacher of grade 4 argued that teaching students with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms might have a negative effect on his teaching career. He stated:

Teaching students with learning disabilities is really messy. If the academic achievement in my class is lower than the national standard, my annual salary increase may be frozen because the mayor and the school principal have adopted academic achievement as a major performance indicator for salary increase assessment. In the long run, mixed classes will affect my teaching status.

In contrast, when asked the same questions about inclusive education in practice, two home economics teachers from grade 1 gave different responses. One (female) explained:

I like teaching them to paint on handkerchiefs. They like brushes and color. When painting, they focus on it very well. The picture may not be completely beautiful, but painting makes them stay focused. It would be good if the school principal and the mayor used home economics as a part of key performance indicators.

The other grade 1 teacher (male) taught students with learning disabilities to make silver bowls. He explained that these students knew how to use their physical strength to hammer a silver bowl from a bowl mold. He related:

Students with learning disabilities may not be academically strong, but they are doing well in my silver bowl class. Unfortunately, home economics at the primary level is not considered for academic achievement. The National Standardized Test only includes math, language, science, and social studies. It would be better if the school could construct or at least revise a curriculum to correspond to the special-need students.

Both home economics teachers indicated that they enjoyed working with students with disabilities in their home economics classes. They thought that their class activities helped those students concentrate on the subject at hand longer than in the academic classrooms. Responses from other teachers, however, illustrated that they fostered negative attitudes toward including students with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms because they did not have the necessary skills for classroom inclusion.

Parental involvement in inclusive education practices

Inclusive education strongly needs the fullest support from family members. However, when asked about their involvement in their children's schooling, the answers from parents were in stark contrast to inclusive education concepts. One parent explained:

I am not well-educated and nobody at home knows how to teach my child. What should we do? If teachers don't know how, who does?

Another parent argued:

A teacher wanted me to bring my child to a hospital for medicine. But I don't have enough money for him to see a doctor. I wish I could.

When asked about teacher-parent meetings held twice in one semester, many parents declined to participate in the discussions about their children with disabilities. The most common answer was that they had limited time during the day. One parent said:

I cannot skip work because I am an hourly-paid employee. Absence from work can result in unemployment and we don't want that situation. I know teachers are well-intentioned, but life is not easy for us and we don't want to risk losing jobs.

From the responses, parental involvement in inclusive education may be insufficient. Low education levels and poverty were the reasons given to avoid discussion with teachers about creating a better learning environment for their children. Results suggested that parents wanted to put their children with disabilities in school every day, but did not appear to have the appropriate awareness concerning their roles in promoting inclusive education.

Discussion

Participants' responses were generally consistent with international literature on inclusive primary education that reflected underlying attitudinal barriers to students with disabilities. According to the findings from this research, problems concerning implementation of inclusive education at municipal primary schools stem from a number of causes: mainly (i) the mistaken impressions toward inclusive education among mayors, (ii) the negative attitudes of school principals and teachers, and (iii) little parental involvement.

The results demonstrate that mayors do not embrace Article 24 of the UNCRPD and SDGs, goal 4.3 and suggest that they are ill-informed concerning inclusive education. Such lack of information may have resulted from a lack of training or prior hands-on experience with inclusive education. This is consistent with earlier international research that revealed a lack of training or little experience with students with disabilities could lead to poor school inclusion preparation (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Ainscow, 2006; Deng & Guo, 2007; Brownell et al., 2010; Florian & Linklater, 2010; de Boer et al., 2011; Bentley-Williams & Morgan, 2013).

Previous research on inclusive education in primary schools also confirms results from this article that such poor preparation has given rise to negative mayoral impressions toward inclusive education which has, in turn, impacted the availability of learning opportunities for students with learning disabilities (Vislie, 2003; Lindsay, 2007; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Brownell et al., 2010; Ruijs, 2017). Under the influence of such misapprehension, a number of mayors have translated the concept of school 'inclusion' into school 'integration.'

It is possible that educational policymakers who are more distant from students with disabilities express more positive attitudes to school ‘integration’ than ‘inclusion’. The mayors in these findings saw inclusive education only as the placement of students with learning disabilities into mainstream schools, regardless of their degree of learning participation while they were in the classrooms. Without appropriate learning participation, classroom integration can discourage students with disabilities and increase a school drop-out rate.

Vislie (2003) notes that placing students with disabilities into mainstream schools through the integration perspective only is not sufficient and these students will be seen as having a different status in the classroom. Eventually, those students may develop social alienation which bars them from learning (Ainscow et al., 2000; Kavale & Forness, 2000). The findings from this research illuminate the interplay between the role of educational policy makers and the failure of school inclusion. Literature on school inclusion strongly emphasizes proper understanding of inclusive education in practice among educational policy shapers (Florian, 2015; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Haug, 2017). It, however, turns out that the misunderstanding of mayors concerning inclusive education has aggravated inclusiveness at the school level because it causes a number of administrative tensions related to classroom inclusion. Ongoing disputes among mayors, school principals and teachers regarding funding allocation and technical support at the school level may be provoked.

The findings indicate that mayors gave inclusive education implementation at a school level to the strict control of an unprepared bureaucracy in inclusive school budget allocations. Small inclusive school grants from mayors is another major barrier to education for students with learning disabilities, because mayors allocated funds on their own authority without either clear understanding of school inclusion or active involvement of school principals and teachers. Such personnel, therefore, may have concluded that an insufficient funding arrangement was one of the major causes impairing the quality of inclusive education.

Another effect stemming from the misapprehension of mayors (discussed above) is the classroom inclusion and academic achievement dilemma (Florian, 2014). According to the mayors' misunderstanding, student achievement was correlated with satisfactory national standardized test scores. Each municipal primary school was required by its mayor to improve the annual test scores of students and such improvement was a key performance indicator for each teacher. Although international literature on inclusive education

emphasizes relationships between teachers' lack of training and classroom inclusion failures (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Brownell et al., 2010; Forlin & Chamber, 2011; Brentley-Williams & Morgan, 2013; Florian, 2015). Findings from this research revealed a different theme of argument, centering on rigid top-down administrative policy with penalties. Based on findings, teachers volunteer to teach students with disabilities, but they may become demoralized because, according to administrative policy, the number of students who pass the national standardized tests is a major factor influencing their annual salary increases, while a negative outcome can lead to a salary cut and jeopardize their teaching career path. Mayors have imposed academic achievement policies as the most important goal of education in their constituencies. Such a goal contradicts the major aims of education for students with disabilities, i.e., independence, a sense of pride and willingness to actively participate in their communities (Vaughn et al., 1996; Florian, 2014). In effect, the dilemma of implementing inclusive education stems from a number of factors, mainly inappropriate assistance from mayors, teachers' lack of training or belief in disability models, and the classroom subjects themselves.

As noted, because of erroneous impressions concerning inclusive education, mayors paid little attention to the learning opportunities of students with disabilities. Such misimpressions may also have made mayors oblivious to the interplay between adequate financial-technical support and teachers' attitudes toward inclusive classrooms. From the interviews, mayors appeared to have allocated insufficient funds to improve teaching-training materials or to sharpen the pedagogical skills of teachers who worked with students with learning disabilities and those without in the same classroom environment. Although teachers had been tasked to achieve inclusive education results, no further assistance was given because, apparently, inclusive education, according to the mayors, did not require any additional investment cost to accommodate disability at school levels.

Subsequently, teachers did not receive the appropriate skill training prior to teaching inclusive classrooms, forcing them to use their immediate problem-solving skills. Without strong support from management level, the day-to-day problems of an inclusive classroom may appear overwhelming and demoralize school teachers as well as discourage the classroom inclusion of students with learning disabilities. Gradually, school principals and teachers may adopt a negative attitude toward those students and inclusive education (Lindsay, 2007; Sharma et al., 2008; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Brownell et al., 2010; Slee, 2011).

Another correlation between teachers' negative attitudes and inclusive classroom is their belief in disability models (Miles & Singal, 2010; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Haug, 2017). Teachers who subscribe to the '*medical model of disability*' believe that such a model centers on a pathological approach requiring interaction between students with disabilities and medical staff, while those who support the '*social model of disability*' perceive that those students must be seen in the context of social interaction. Teachers who follow the social model of disability strongly believe in heterogeneous classrooms to encourage those students with learning disabilities to engage with their classmates (as in the case of the home economics teachers above). In contrast, teachers who embraced a pathological approach declined inclusive classrooms as in the case of language teachers from this research. The inclusive classroom is therefore subject to the teachers' belief in a medical/social model of disability. The findings are generally consistent with previous research that the notion was found to be an important factor influencing the attitudes of teachers toward inclusive education (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Brownell et al., 2010).

Apart from sufficient support and teachers' beliefs in different disability models, findings have provided evidence that the subject taught was another factor influencing teachers' attitudes. Subjects requiring active class engagement are grouped under social life skill improvement, e.g., art and home economics, whereas math, science, language, and social studies are considered academic skills. Findings from this research confirmed previous research that teachers who have never experienced successfully facilitating classroom activities between students with disabilities and those without acquired a negative attitude toward inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Florian & Linklater, 2010; de Boer et al., 2011; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Also, it revealed that teachers who taught academic subjects paid very little attention to inclusive classroom interactions between students. Rather, they put their emphasis on the individual student's academic improvement; students with high scores on exams or quizzes were perceived as contributing factors to a successful teaching career.

Because they did not earn a degree in Special Education, nor did they receive enough budgetary support for classroom inclusion management training, school principals and teachers perceived students with learning disabilities as stressful to handle while they were in mainstream classrooms with their classmates. Additionally, academic subject teachers perceived these students as threats to their teaching careers and may explain why

they were reluctant to welcome students with learning disabilities to their classrooms. If teachers had received sufficient skill training in successful classroom engagement and embraced a heterogeneous approach to classroom instruction along with sufficient technical support from mayors and school principals, they might have gradually developed more positive attitudes toward students with disabilities and become more likely to promote classroom inclusion (Farrell et al., 2007; Savolainen et al., 2012; Kamenopoulou & Dukpa, 2017; Vasileiadis & Dojkou-Avlidou, 2018).

Apart from the challenges discussed above, research has suggested that parental involvement is one of the major factors influencing the learning outcomes of students with disabilities and lowering their drop-out rates (Fan & Chen, 2001; Christenson, 2003; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). In the interviews, however, parents did not develop relationships with teachers or the schools. The limited parental involvement resulted from parents' beliefs about inclusive education management and their current life contexts.

Frequent monitoring and supervision at home are strong mechanisms ensuring that students with learning disabilities have wider opportunities to learn more (Clough & Nutbrown, 2004). In the interviews, parents believed that they were not educated enough to monitor and supervise their children while at home. They implicitly argued that this role should be performed by school teachers. This belief discouraged parents' participation in teacher-parent discussions about their children. Consequently, they avoided taking an active role in school engagement for their children's learning opportunities (Christenson, 2003).

The parental beliefs correlated with their current life contexts. Their responses clearly indicated that their household financial restrictions would be an insurmountable barrier to their involvement in inclusive schools. Poverty has forcibly imposed financial restrictions onto the households of students with learning disabilities. Therefore, household expenses always receive first priority over inclusive education. As a result, parents with children with disabilities are increasingly reluctant to make a trade-off between their employment and inclusive school involvement. With a low socio-economic status, parents who have children with disabilities feel economically insecure and such insecurity permeates their daily lives. In addition, the schools do not accommodate parents with alternative ways of involvement. Eventually, these situations are a source of negativity where parental involvement in inclusive education is concerned (Rodriguez et al., 2014).

On the one hand, the findings discussed above have demonstrated that respondents interpreted inclusive education as only integrating children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. On the other, responses have portrayed differing opinions among interviewees as to whether inclusive education at municipal primary schools is the end itself or part of a process. Mayors, school principals and parents shed light on school attendance, i.e., equal educational opportunity by placing those students into mainstream schools and promoting their academic achievements. Teachers, however, place greater emphasis on the inclusion process, i.e., training in disability-pedagogical teaching skills and appropriate assistance from mayors that involve changes in policy formulation, implementation and incentives. It is therefore argued that interviewees hold divergent views on inclusive education which has resulted in inconsistent practices.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

Based on in-depth interviews, this article identifies the underlying causes of poor quality inclusive education at selected municipal schools. Because of false impressions toward inclusive education among mayors and negative attitudes of teachers, municipal primary schools are barely capable of providing students with learning disabilities with quality learning environments in mainstream classrooms.

Implementing inclusive education at municipal schools does not mean that discrimination is alleviated (OECD, 1999; Ainscow et.al., 2000; Slee, 2011; UNICEF, 2016). Respondents from this study have negative attitudes toward inclusion and they give scant attention to fundamental individual differences among students with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Teachers indicate that mayors and school principals should not simply put students with learning disabilities into mainstream classrooms without providing teachers with appropriate pedagogical teaching skills for children with special needs.

Furthermore, this research suggests that institutional support, e.g., adequate budget allocation, teacher-training materials etc., should have been given before recruiting students with learning disabilities. These hurdles have fostered negative teacher attitudes toward inclusive education. Without a positive attitude and institutional support from mayors, it is a major challenge for school principals and classroom teachers to guarantee the appropriate quality of inclusive education for students with learning disabilities.

Among recommendations derived from this research, it is proposed that mayors undertake a leading role through their capacity-building processes to construct inclusive education frameworks or guidelines that support inclusive schools and arrange external resource support systems, especially professional support teams, to help teachers who request guidance for teaching students in mixed ability classrooms. Another suggested practice is the allocation of funds for teacher training, particularly concerning attitudinal changes and disability-pedagogical skill training.

In addition, mayors and school principals need to allocate sufficient budget resources to support curriculum adaptations, in order to create better learning environments for students with learning disabilities to embrace their individual learning needs. In order to make these suggestions a reality, the Ministry of Education and municipalities should revise their academic achievement policies to create an alternative method of performance evaluation and assessment for students with disabilities and their teachers.

In order to guarantee active parental involvement in inclusive education, school principals and teachers must design an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that suits each student and parent, since IEP can lead to effective communication between parents and teachers. More importantly, mayors and school principals should encourage parents to actively engage in inclusive classrooms through informal organizations, e.g., local communities, local disability NGOs, and other advocacy groups. In order to encourage parents to become involved in inclusive classrooms through informal groups, mayors and school principals need to be more persuasive and available for outreach programs.

These informal groups may also be of help in raising public awareness of students with learning disabilities in local communities. Municipalities and schools need to involve those organizations in inclusive education policy formulation and implementation to make them mindful of the significance of education for children with disabilities. If well-placed, those organizations can be a contributory factor to inclusive education. They can be an assisting factor to parents who need guidelines for inclusive education involvement. They may also be able to help municipalities and schools attain inclusive education goals at local levels.

Despite the insights this study offers on causes that weaken inclusive education at municipal schools, there are a number of limitations. It discussed only subjective viewpoints from mayors, principals, teachers, and parents who were purposively recruited from only three local areas in Thailand. As such, it is inappropriate to generalize from these research findings concerning inclusive education barriers to other disability classifications and higher educational levels. Future research on different aspects of inclusive education using a quantitative approach with inclusive classroom observations and different disability classifications may provide more varied responses, discussions, and recommendations.

Inclusive education needs a healthy dialogue to ensure effective inclusive education at local schools for students with disabilities. Without sufficient institutional support from mayors and positive attitudes from school principals, teachers and parents, attempts to include students with learning disabilities into inclusive classrooms at municipal primary schools will be very difficult. If students with learning disabilities receive appropriate inclusive education in their local communities, they will be able to improve their socio-economic situation in the long run and becoming contributing members of their communities.

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