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Enhancing inclusive practices awareness in early childhood teachers using the process of contemplative practice and design thinking

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Abstract

Early childhood (EC) teachers need support to deal with the challenges of children in an inclusive classroom due to their feeling of unpreparedness in knowledge, understanding and inclusive practices. While design thinking is a method of enhancing the ability to solve problems creatively, a contemplative approach that focuses on non-prejudice observation and reflection within a supportive learning community will increase their empathy and understanding of inclusive practices. This R&D research has two aims: (1) to establish an instructional process based on contemplative practice and design thinking; and (2) to investigate the impact of using this process with EC teachers, in the hope of enhancing their awareness of inclusive practices. The participants were thirteen ECE graduate students, studying in the second semester of the academic year 2019. The study used a self-assessment form and a semi-structured focus group interview as research tools. Data were analyzed by frequency, mean score, standard deviation, and content analysis. The findings found that: (1) over the course of thirteen weeks, the development process was divided into three phases. Phase 1, self-observation to cultivate mindfulness, attentiveness, and objective observation skills. Phase 2, child study to cultivate empathy with the child. Phase 3, collaborative design thinking to develop activities that accommodate the needs of the child; (2) After implementing the instructional process, participants had a higher mean score of inclusive practices awareness than before, at a significance level of .05. A perspective toward inclusion gained the highest mean score, followed by action and attitudes toward themselves, respectively.

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Introduction

Since Thailand implemented the Education for Disabilities Act. B.E. 2551 in 2008, every school has a responsibility to provide appropriate education for every child. Nowadays, 20 percent of 3–5 year olds have delayed development and 4.7 percent are diagnosed having learning difficulty at the elementary level (Sabpaitoon, 2018). Normally, a kindergarten class size is 25–30 children per teacher, with at least 1–2 children with additional needs. To support children with special needs in inclusive classes, teachers must be prepared to put new knowledge and skills into practice in their classrooms. According to a study by Zagona et al. (2017), teachers set lower expectations than can actually be realized when teaching children with special needs, and have significant concerns and doubts about the potential of these children to be successful in class. However, a feeling of preparedness has positive effects on teachers' attitudes about inclusive learning. These findings are consistent with the situation of inclusive education in Thailand. Teachers at all levels of education in inclusive classrooms lack knowledge, understanding, and practical skills in teaching and supporting young children with special needs, as doing so involves tasks beyond conventional teaching (Bubpha, 2014; Kotsri & Viseshsiri, 2014; Sajjasukwattana, 2012).

Even though Thai EC teachers hold at least a Bachelor's degree in ECE and have studied two courses related to special education, they are still unconfident in dealing with young children with special needs. This is relevant to the conclusion by Majoko (2018) that EC teachers are concerned about inclusive education because they are not skilled in the knowledge and practices relevant to an inclusive classroom and also lack resources for teaching all the children in the class. Moreover, Klibthong and Agbenyega (2020) mentioned that both teaching experience and teacher roles affect inclusive practices. The knowledge that teachers need in order to be able to manage inclusive learning comprises psychology of children with special needs, knowledge of activities to promote learning and life skills for children with special needs, learning management for children with special needs (Janechitvanich et al., 2019), and also supports from professionals who are competent in promoting learning. When teachers bring this knowledge, along with practical experience, into the inclusive classroom, the result is an improvement in attitudes and practices towards children with special needs (Sucuoğlu et al., 2013; Zagona, et al., 2017).

Literature Review

Inclusive Practices Awareness

Schussler et al. (2010) pointed out that the quality of the teacher is determined by the perception of the person. Thus, beliefs, culture, values, and intellectual abilities affect the assumptions to which each person adheres. Therefore, teachers should learn to understand themselves and gain knowledge about themselves, as well as recognize their own hypothetical values and prejudices that distort their view of others and prevent them from seeing reality. Moreover, when teachers learn to be emotionally aware and socially and emotionally competent, they can develop effective inclusive classroom practices (Dias & Cadime, 2016).

The measures of inclusive practices awareness included in this study were synthesized from Rouse (2008), Spratt and Florian (2015), and Zabeli and Gjelaj (2020). There are three psychological components to the development of inclusive practices awareness in early childhood teachers: (1) perspective towards inclusion—a way of thinking about the world and understanding principles and professional values in relation to classroom practice, including knowledge and understanding of children with differences; (2) attitudes towards oneself—recognizing and understanding one's own emotions, appreciating individual differences, changing and developing one's perceptions of the learning abilities of children with special needs, and reassessing one's thoughts and feelings toward children with differences; and (3) action—educational practices that include classroom organization, classroom management, and accommodations to these practices in an effort to create effective inclusive classrooms.

Contemplative Practices

Contemplative practices are intended to foster a supportive learning community. The participant applies introspection to direct experiences in order to make sense of these experiences. This is achieved by focusing on observation and reflection, which affect one's thoughts, emotions, and actions. As a result, transformative learning is a fruitful part of the learning process that enhances self-awareness and understanding of others, and encourages a spiritual perspective on teaching (Khayankij, 2012; Nilchaikovit, 2008).

Contemplative practices in this study rely on deep listening, dialogue, reflection, and relaxation, as follows: (1) relaxation, making oneself comfortable in body and mind so as to create a state of openness and readiness for learning; (2) deep listening, focused listening that involves suspension of judgment and criticism; (3) dialogue, a conversation in which the listener pays complete and conscious attention to the speaker; and (4) learning reflection, a review of experience that takes into consideration one's emotions, feelings, and ideas in order to find meaning in the experience, including familiar patterns in response to experience (Khayankij, 2012). Moreover, two practices were implemented, namely, contemplative observation and child study, in order to create an understanding of the feelings of children with additional needs before starting design thinking to create activities that respond to their needs.

Contemplative observation is based on sensory observation, which involves using all senses to assist individuals to empathize with the children, comprehend their feelings, and form meaningful relationships with them (Brown, 1999). This makes the assessment more authentic. The first step in developing an understanding of others' feelings, according to Gallagher and Thordarson (2018), is to develop the ability to observe others in detail and without judgment—which also includes paying attention to the details of one's own physical responses, emotions, and thoughts while observing.

Child study is the process of understanding a child by gathering information from a variety of sources. It is divided into three steps. Step 1 is a nonjudgmental physical depiction of the child. It incorporates basic information about the child (age, gender, weight, height, date of birth, physical and psychological medical history), family background and educational background, along with observations about the child's abilities and activities, including physical movement, emotional reactions, social interactions, language skills, memory, and learning retention. Step 2 is a contemplative review of information gathered about the child, resulting in a clear mental picture of the child, followed by a dialogue to help the participant answer the question, "What is this child requesting from the teacher?" Step 3 is a brainstorming session with the goal of answering the question "What should I do for this child?" so that the participant can develop and summarize an action plan for the individual child.

Design Thinking

According to Clarke (2020), design thinking is a unique way of thinking that focuses on problem solving through creativity. This is consistent with Gottlieb et al. (2017), who define design thinking as a set of tools, techniques, and a mindset that can be used to solve problems tailored to a child's needs. Hence, the outcome of a process requires at least three critical interrelated bodies of knowledge: (1) what teachers know about how children develop and learn; (2) what teachers know about an individual child; and (3) the social and cultural context in which those children live and learn. It can be utilized at any age, from kindergarten to adulthood. It encourages metacognitive competence, a method of thought and action that emphasizes process and practice (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018; Loyola et al., 2020; Scheer et al., 2012; Srikulwong et al., 2019).

To summarize the concept, contemplative practices and design thinking can be integrated into teaching practices to help teachers solve challenges that are relevant to their students' needs. The purpose of this study is to develop an instructional process based on both concepts, as well as to investigate the influence of employing the developed instructional process on early childhood teachers' awareness of inclusive practices.

Methodology

Two phases of research and development are described as follows:

Phase 1: Process Development

Participants were 14 ECE graduate students in a part-time program, from the first semester of the academic year 2019 (June to November 2019). They were mostly EC teachers in both private and public schools. The researcher requested consent for the data collection without exclusion criteria.

The trial instructional process was developed based on the research framework. Content validity was verified by three professionals to approve the quality of the process. The IOC index found in the range of .67–1.0 was .82. Data were gathered after the course, using quantitative data, including the Self-Assessment Questionnaire. It uses five levels (strongly disagree, disagree, unsure, agree, and strongly agree) to measure

three aspects: perspective towards inclusion, attitude towards oneself, and action. In this study, there were eight questions related to each aspect, for a total of 24 questions. The IOC Index of this questionnaire was .93 and the reliability was .89. Qualitative data were obtained via semi-structured questions about learning experiences on the course. It consisted of two aspects: opinions on the teaching and learning process (content, method, learning activities, assignment, assessment, and learning atmosphere) and learning outcomes that occur in three areas (perspective on overall learning, attitudes towards oneself, and actions). The IOC index was .92. Data were collected after finishing the course through group interviews with 4–5 participants in each session. The audio of the interviews was recorded, and verbatim transcripts were made. After using content analysis, a member checking technique was used to determine trustworthiness.

The researcher improved the instructional process and research tools, then studied the next phase.

Phase 2: The Experimental Process

Participants were 13 ECE graduate students in a part-time program, from the second semester of the academic year 2019. Twelve of them were EC teachers. A one-group pretest-posttest design was used to verify the instructional process. The researcher requested consent for the data collection without exclusion criteria.

Self-assessment and small group interviews were conducted before implementing the instructional process. These interviews each took approximately 90 minutes. The audio of the interviews was recorded, and verbatim transcripts were made.

The course lessons covered 13 weeks, three hours per week from January to April 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, lessons were held online beginning in week 10. A posttest was conducted after week 13 with the same procedure. Quantitative data were analyzed by using the mean, standard deviation, the normal curve test, and t-dependent test. Qualitative data were assessed using content analysis and a member check technique to verify the data. The instructional process was then refined, and the final process was proposed.

Results

The Proposed Instructional Process

The following are the three phases of the instructional process for the course on the inclusive classroom in early childhood education programs. Two weeks of preparation, such as orientation and listening to the concept of design thinking and early intervention were done before starting the instructional process:

Phase 1: Self-Observation. This is a practice of careful observation through artistic activities, including clay, water coloring, and tree observation. It consists of four steps: check in, contemplative observation practice, sharing, and reflection. This phase lasted for three weeks. The learning outcome of this phase is to cultivate mindfulness, attentiveness, and an objective observation skill.

Phase 2: Child study. This is an observation of children with special needs in a kindergarten classroom, along with a group meeting in the university classroom. It consists of four steps: check in, contemplative observation practice, sharing, and reflection. During the week, the child concerned is observed from all aspects, i.e. physical appearance, energy or vitality, emotions and feelings, and perception of the world. This phase lasted for four weeks. Empathy and the ability to identify the child's needs are the result of this phase.

Phase 3: Collaborative design thinking. This is a collaboration to find ways to promote the development and learning of children observed in the classroom. It consists of three steps: check in, sharing, and reflection. A small group dialogue is set up in the university classroom to brainstorm solutions according to the children's needs, before refining the best solution and testing the prototype. This phase lasted for four weeks. Inclusive practice awareness is rising in this phase.

Inclusive Practice Awareness of ECE Graduate Students

After implementing the instructional process, the inclusive practice awareness mean scores (M = 4.39) were higher than before (M = 3.81) at a significance level of .05. Considering each aspect, all aspects had higher mean scores after the experiment than before the experiment, at a statistical significance level of .05 (Table 1).

Table 1 Comparative results of the inclusive practice awareness mean scores before and after the process experiment

Item	Before the experiment		After the experiment		*t*	*p*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
1. Perspective towards inclusion	3.81	0.57	4.39	0.32	3.30	.00*
2. Attitude toward oneself	4.04	0.51	4.37	0.31	2.53	.01*
3. Action	4.00	0.45	4.42	0.49	3.87	.00*
Total	3.95	0.42	4.39	0.25	4.03	.00*

Note: *$p < .05$.

Perspective toward inclusion

Qualitative data indicated that before taking the course, all participants had experience teaching children with special needs, as well as courses at the bachelor's level related to special education management in early childhood. However, eleven participants still lacked the knowledge and understanding of how to promote the development and learning of children with special needs. Three participants held the opinion that children with severe special needs should not be included in regular classes because the teacher could not take care of them adequately.

After the course, participants understood the feelings of children better—moving from sympathy for the child's situation to a deeper understanding of the child's differences and ability to achieve the learning goals despite a history of reduced expectations (eleven participants). Eight participants advocated for a universal design of teaching that also allowed for individual differences. The idea that all adults in the child's life should be involved in the child's development—whether parents, teachers, or executives—and understand education for children with special needs was held by seven participants. One participant maintained that all children have the potential to develop.

Attitude toward oneself

Before taking the course, participants felt tired and overwhelmed if children with special needs were included in the class, due to their lack of confidence and knowledge in teaching this group of children. After the course, some participants felt that the children with special needs were not a burden. They welcomed children with special needs in their classes. Participants also were better aware of themselves, especially their own weaknesses (eleven participants). They had greater emotional awareness, and were able to achieve peace of mind in dealing with their own stress (nine participants). They were calmer, did not judge children who were different in class, and did not label children with different needs as slowing the progress of others (six participants). They had a higher estimation of their own worth as teachers, and were more positive and happier about their work (four participants).

Action

Before taking the course, participants worked to create classroom environments in which the treatment of children with special needs in the classroom was not different from other children. Their strategies included giving students with special needs more time to complete tasks and more attention, and encouraging other students to help these students. After the course, some participants agreed with changing the classroom environment to provide children with access to self-learning materials and equipment (eight participants). Seven participants advocated for changing teachers' treatment toward children with special needs by giving love, compassion, attention, being more relaxed, and responding to children more gently. Six participants agreed that changing the atmosphere in the classroom helped children to have better relationships with each other and with teachers, and encouraged children to help each other more. Five participants said that they adjusted classroom content to benefit children with different abilities. They adjusted learning plans and assessment criteria for children with special needs. Goals were set according to the child's skill level. Four participants reported that they gave feedback to each child differently, and added an assessment model to find out which children had difficulty learning. Two participants reported that they had more confidence in communicating with parents, and gave children more time to do things by themselves. They also had children with more advanced abilities help children with special needs.

Discussion

Kindergarten teachers need extra training to be able to deal with diversity in the class. Contents related to inclusive education should be designed as a sequence by

implementing experiential learning with a supportive learning community. The designed instructional process is hierarchical. It starts by practicing self-observation skills with a tool of thoughtful observation and then observing children as they really are according to the child study process for students to create a sense of belonging. This will further develop into an understanding of the child's feelings in line with the design thinking process that begins with empathy, which is important to understand children's perspectives and to identify developmental and learning problems that should be addressed from the user's point of view (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018). Then the next step is to plan activities which support child development step by step and that align with evidence-based procedures, which is consistent with Gottlieb et al. (2017). Experiences in each stage of teaching and learning are organized meaningfully and can be put into practice while they are with children in the kindergarten classroom, making it easy for students to connect their learning, affecting their understanding of the concept of inclusive learning. It is both a process and a framework (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020).

The learning atmosphere in the course is relaxed, trustworthy, and open, encouraging students to leave their comfort zone. Furthermore, challenges or tasks which are assigned to students are appropriate as they are not too difficult and not too easy, allowing students to enter a state of flow in learning throughout the course. Students are able to design activities to promote development and learning that will respond to the child's case study in accordance with the child's context. The process of repetition is not tiring but makes the idea clearer. This is in line with Gallagher and Thordarson (2018) who said design thinking is used to develop teachers into thinkers who can create learning management plans that respond to the real needs of children. They are able to design teaching strategies and adapt the environment to accommodate the abilities and needs of individual children.

Creating an open space where students communicate honestly about their experiences leads to changes in perspectives and ideas. Open-mindedness is the key to developing strong relationships. It is a learning space where sensitive issues can be communicated, and the voices are heard without judgment. It is a safe space where one can listen attentively and reflect on the learnings through the experiences of peers, leading to an understanding of diversity and an acceptance of individual differences in children in the classroom (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2014).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Adult learning theory is an underlying principle in building learning processes to support EC teachers in higher education, and it values teachers' experiences. EC teachers need structured learning accompanied by on-the-job training to accomplish inclusive practices in the classroom. Hence, they need additional training to enhance their knowledge, attitude, and skills in the area of inclusion. This developed instructional process can lead them to new ways of dealing with diversity in the classroom. By practicing reflective thinking through contemplative activities such as art, observation, child study, and dialogue, teachers gain more self-awareness and understanding of others.

Moreover, the result of this research not only benefits practices of EC teacher toward children with special needs but also other children in the class. The atmosphere of the classroom has changed to be more accepting, caring, empathetic, gentle, and less stressful for children. As well as the enhancement of positive social interaction such as strong relationships, cooperative work, helping, and sharing.

Implementing this process in graduate courses on inclusive education involves four aspects: preparation, assessment of learning outcomes, assignments, and the role of the instructor.

1. Preparation—Courses on inclusive education should provide pre-assessments for participants to self-assess their knowledge, attitudes, and skills in regard to inclusive classrooms. Instructors could add some lessons to improve fundamental knowledge for participants who lack educational experience by allowing them to study on their own outside the specified learning time.

2. Assessment of Learning Outcomes—Instructors should provide assessments in each phase of the process, and also provide feedback for participants at each stage of the course. Meanwhile, instructors can tailor activity elements to the preferences of participants with varying backgrounds.

3. Assignments—Individual feedback should be provided for each task. There should also be opportunities for sharing the strategies that participants have created to the wider teaching community and to the public. Participants should be proud to be known as creators of educational strategies from a user's point of view.

4. The Role of the Instructor—Instructors should create an atmosphere which is friendly, stable, safe,

open minded, respectful, and non-judgmental, so that participants feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings without being judged. Instructors should have the flexibility to respond to participant feedback or requests. Lectures should not be the main focus of instruction. Rather, instructors should focus on the needs of the needs of participants and the value of their direct experiences as classroom teachers with special needs or at-risk children.

Suggestions for Future Research

This research was done with a small number of sample participants using a one-group design. Further research should be expanded by doing more research with more children, applying the design thinking process to develop learning management plans that meet the needs of children in the classroom, or using design thinking as a tool for professional development of in-service and pre-service teachers, and also, a study about what assessment tools are appropriate to enhance teachers' inclusive practice awareness.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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