THAI SECONDARY TEACHER ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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Abstract

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study was to examine Thai secondary teacher attitudes towards inclusion of students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms.

Methodology: The researcher collected quantitative data using a questionnaire with 28 Likert-type scale questions, adapted from the Opinions Relative to Integration of Students with Disabilities (ORI) as well as information related to training in special education, experience, and workload. The participants were comprised of a representative group of 370 secondary teachers from all regions of Thailand. Most participants indicated that they were female general education teachers and had a Bachelor’s degree.

Main Finding: Through multiple linear regression, the findings showed that Thai secondary teachers generally held a positive attitude towards the inclusion of students with learning disabilities into general education classrooms. All three independent variables (hours of training, years of teaching experience, and hours of workload) were significant predictors of teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive classrooms, though the hours of workload was the strongest predictor.

Applications: The study was conducted to better understand the variables that are meaningful to teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion.

Keywords: Inclusion, Learning Disability, Attitude, Training

INTRODUCTION

The goal of most countries is to provide their children with access to education; for children with disabilities, this is not always the case. In Thailand, there are about 1,615,629 individuals with disabilities, but only an estimated 62% of these individuals had ever attended or graduated school. Unfortunately, 37.97% (613,478) of school-age individuals with disabilities never go to school. Of those students with disabilities who do attend school, most will drop out upon graduating from elementary school. Only 48.63% of Thai individuals with disabilities who graduate from school continue on to higher education (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). However, of the 404,602 students with disabilities who are registered with the Ministry of Education in 2016, only 83.33% of them study in general education schools (Pruekchaikul, Kuptametanon, & Walker, 2016). Despite global efforts to include all students in school regardless of their disabilities, Thailand has not been able to meet this goal. It is especially surprising to note that although Thailand hosted the World’s Declaration on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs in 1990, there are still so many Thai students with disabilities who were not receiving an education or being included in general education schools. In June 1994, UNESCO’s World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality proposed an inclusive education system to ensure the inclusion of students with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994). Representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organizations were present at this conference with the goal of creating an inclusive education system for students with disabilities in order to achieve “Education for All”. Following the conference, Thailand was one of many countries that adopted the Education for All policy and established an inclusive education system as the target of the country’s educational policy (Narot, 2010). However, despite their earlier commitment, it was not until the National Education Act in 1999 that inclusive classrooms became a reality in Thailand. In Thailand, there remain various ideas about which students can and cannot be successfully included. For example, some students with disabilities (e.g., ADHD, emotional disabilities) can be fully included in the general education classroom, as long as their behaviors are appropriate. Some students with disabilities (e.g., autism and learning disabilities) are only included for some subjects (e.g. art, physical education, and music) in the general education classroom. However, this partial inclusion creates a very uncomfortable situation for some students as they are expected to leave the classroom after a certain lesson. In practice, one to four students with learning disabilities will have to walk in and out of the classroom at different points of the school day as they transition between their general and special education classrooms, while the other thirty students in the class watch them. As a teacher, watching this daily humiliation inspired me to study about inclusive classrooms. Although teachers intend to help students with disabilities through this partial inclusion, it may cause additional embarrassment and shame for students with disabilities. Rather than including students all day, this partial inclusion may be more harmful than beneficial.

Teachers' attitudes can enhance or obstruct the implementation of inclusion, and numerous studies have described teachers’ attitudes as a crucial factor in the implementation of inclusion (e.g., Bender, Vail, & Scott, 1995; Cagran & Schmidt, 2011; Leyser & Tappendorf, 2001). Studies indicate that if teachers have positive attitudes towards inclusion, they also feel more
confident in their abilities and are more likely to adapt instructional materials and procedures in order to fulfill their obligations to accommodate students’ needs in inclusive settings (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Norwich, 1994). However, teachers with negative attitudes towards inclusion tend to have lower expectations for students with disabilities and tend to negatively influence their students’ feelings about their learning experiences. Furthermore, teachers with negative attitudes about teaching students with disabilities may provide a substandard level of instruction or looking down on these students (Dapudong, 2014; Wilczenski, 1994). Since teachers’ attitudes are crucial to effective implementation of inclusive education practices and the promotion of the success of students with disabilities, it is essential to understand the factors that potentially affect these attitudes. According to the most recent data, Thailand had 337,144 students with disabilities who studied in inclusive schools, and the majority of those students (83.75%) were diagnosed with learning disabilities (Pruekchaikul et al., 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess Thai secondary teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion of students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms and to better understand how factors related to training, experience, and workload might affect these attitudes.

The specific research questions for this study were:

1. Does the number of hours of special education training predicts teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion of students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms?
2. Do years of experience teaching predict teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion of students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms?
3. Does the estimated number of hours of teachers’ workload (per week) predict teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion of students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms?

METHODS

The researcher explored the attitudes of public secondary teachers in Thailand as related to the inclusion of students with learning disabilities by using cross-sectional research method.

Setting and Participants

The first criterion for selecting schools was that they were considered inclusive schools. The second criterion for selecting schools was that the schools must have more than 30 students who were identified with learning disabilities. This criterion was put in place to make it more likely that teachers in the schools would be familiar with teaching students who had learning disabilities. The last criterion was that there were at least some teachers in the schools who had attended the state-mandated 200 hours of special education training since training is one of the variables that the researcher wanted to measure. With this additional criterion, 164 possible schools were identified that met all three criteria. Thailand is generally divided into four regions. The researcher applied a stratified sampling process to obtain a representative sample by dividing the potential population of schools (i.e., 164) into strata according to location and criteria. According to the Bureau of Special Education Administration (2016), at the time of this study, 37 schools were located in the North, 104 schools were in the Northeast, 17 schools were in the central region, and six schools were in the South. The researcher then computed the relative percentage of schools in each region and then selected a corresponding representative ratio. This method was used to create a representative ratio to select schools from each region. Using this method, a total of 27 schools were selected from each of the regions. Then, the number of schools in each region was further divided in half to create a more manageable sample size. Therefore, the researcher collected data from teachers in three schools in the North, eight schools in the Northeast, two schools in the Central Region, and one school in the South, for a total of 14 schools. The researcher selected the school(s) within each region to be included in this study by using a convenience sample method. Based on G*Power 3.1 analysis for linear multiple regression, a minimum sample size for a medium effect size with power = .95 and α = .05 was 119 participants (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). All participants in this study reported having experience teaching at least one or more students with learning disabilities. From these 14 schools, 488 participants completed the questionnaire. There were 118 questionnaires that were excluded because of missing data. Thus, the researcher conducted a statistical analysis with the final sample of 370 participants.

Instrumentation

The Opinions Relative to the Integration of Students with Disabilities (ORI) was developed by Antonak and Larrivee in 1995. The purpose of the ORI was to measure teachers’ attitudes towards the integration of students with disabilities into general classrooms. A Cronbach’s alpha reliability analysis was conducted with a sample of the current study and yielded an alpha of 0.81. Therefore, the reliability of this instrument with the current sample was considered to be acceptable. In 2013, Dapudong translated the ORI into the Thai language and administered it to 310 Thai primary general education teachers. In his study, Dapudong (2013) added three more items to the ORI. The original ORI had 25 items, but the ORI (Thai language version) had 28 items. To help avoid positive response bias, 14 items were positively worded, and 14 items were negatively worded. The negatively worded items were reverse-scored prior to the calculation of the scale value in accordance with the original instrument (Antonak & Larrivee, 1995). Consistent with the directions for administration as outlined by Antonak and Larrivee (1995) participants were asked to indicate their endorsement of each statement by selecting from a continuum of responses such as “disagree very much” to “agree very much”. To score the ORI, the
researcher positively scored the 14 items that were worded negatively by reversing the sign of the response (i.e., from + to -, or from – to +). Thus, the final overall scores ranged from 0 to 168, with a higher score indicating a more positive attitude toward including students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms (Antonak & Larrivee, 1995; Dapudong, 2013). The researcher wanted to establish the content validity of the ORI with this sample to ensure that the items adequately reflected contemporary ideas about inclusion (Salkind, 2014). The researcher asked three professors in psychology and special education who are bilingual (Thai and English) to review the test items. The suggestions of these experts were incorporated and back-translated to develop the final research instrument. The experts’ suggestions and back translating process resulted in some change in the research instrument. To determine the reliability of the “new” research instrument, the researcher used a pilot study with a population of 30 Thai secondary teachers. The participants indicated that the questionnaire was clear and they were able to follow the logic of the questions. Only one word in the questionnaire was found to have an incorrect spelling, which was corrected before distributing to the study sample. The participants did not offer any suggestions for changing or rewording any questions. Cronbach’s alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of this instrument resulting in a reliability estimate of 0.89. Therefore, reliability was considered to be acceptable.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

After receiving permission from the University Internal Review Board for human research, the researcher began approaching districts in each of the identified regions and schools. All data were collected by the researcher using a paper-and-pencil survey method. If teachers did not want to participate, they could keep the questionnaire or return it to the researcher. Teachers who agreed to take part in the study then completed the questionnaire while the researcher waited for them to fill it out, which took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24 was used for data analysis.

RESULTS

A total of 370 participants were categorized as follows: 92 North teachers (24.9%), 72 Central teachers (19.5%), 167 North-East teachers (45.1%), and 39 South teachers (10.5%). The majority of teachers had earned a Bachelor’s degree (n = 241 or 65.1%), with the rest having earned a Master’s degree (n = 128; 34.6%) and only one participant with a Doctorate. Most teachers (n = 359 or 97%) had majors not related to special education and only 11 (3%) teachers reported majoring in a subject similar to special education. Only 5 (1.4%) of the participants reported themselves as special education teachers. Table 1 provides a summary of teacher training, experience, and workload by region.

Table 1: Mean of Demographic Variables in Each Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Hours of training</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Hours of workload</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>12.84</td>
<td>34.50</td>
<td>17.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>11.49</td>
<td>28.48</td>
<td>18.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-East</td>
<td>7.18</td>
<td>46.89</td>
<td>9.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>12.95</td>
<td>21.18</td>
<td>16.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10.03</td>
<td>38.63</td>
<td>13.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Across the four regions, teachers reported a very similar number for the mean hours of workloads. This number was surprisingly low considering that the Thai Ministry of Education has determined that an expected work week includes Monday through Friday from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm during the school week (Ministry of Education, 2004). Therefore, teachers must be in school for at least eight hours a day or 40 hours per week. However, the mean number of hours reported by the participants was 25.79 hours a week. It is suspected that teachers may have reported their hours in relation to those spent with their students rather than reporting the additional time that they use for conducting classroom research, writing lesson plans, and doing multiple administrative tasks. To better understand the average hours per week reported in the study, the researcher interviewed four teachers about their answers to this question. All teachers confirmed that they only provided the number of hours in the classroom directly working with students. In contrast, the mean number of hours of special education training was quite different across regions. For example, in the Northeast, the number of special education training hours appeared to be lower than any other region (by 4.5 to 5 hours). The North, Central, and South regions were fairly similar in the mean number of hours of training (X̄_N=12.84, X̄_C=11.89, and X̄_S=12.95). Generally, the population in Northeast Thailand indicates the highest level of poverty and is the least developed. The Northeast region
also represented the highest number of small schools. Because of the number of schools in this region, the Thai Ministry of Education opens many teacher positions in this region each year. Unfortunately, many teachers may work in the Northeast region for only one to two years before moving to another region (Hays, 2013; Jitsuchon & Richter, 2007; Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2017). It is difficult to determine why so many teachers move from this region, but this trend may be reflected in the relatively lower number of mean years of teaching experience ($X_{mean}=9.57$) and possibly, the fewer hours of special education training ($X_{mean}=7.18$) in comparison to other regions.

All surveys were scored in compliance with the original instructions for the ORI. A higher score implied a positive attitude, while a lower score indicated a negative attitude, with possible scores ranging from 0 – 168. Results showed a range of scores from 40 to 140 with an average score of 88.49 and the standard deviation of 16.75. If the researcher used the score of 84 as a cut-point, where scores lower than 84 indicated negative attitudes, the results indicated that 63.6% of the participants held slightly more positive attitudes towards inclusive classrooms. Before conducting the data analysis, the researcher ensured that the variables of interest met appropriate statistical assumptions. There were no missing data for any of the 370 participants. However, there were outliers in these data as the standardized residual was between -2.94 and 4.04. Consequently, the researcher removed the two participants who were significant outliers. The researcher repeated this analysis with the remaining 368 participants, and the resulting analysis indicated that the data contained no outliers (Std. Residual Min = -3.01, Std. Residual Max = 3.24).

Using the enter method, the regression model indicated that hours of training, years of teaching experience, and hours of workload were significant predictors of teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive classrooms ($F(3, 364) = 12.14, p < 0.01$). All three independent variables contributed significantly to the model, though the hours of workload was the greatest contributor. The effect size of $R^2$ was 0.09, meaning that 9% of the total variance in teachers’ attitudes was accounted for by the independent variables. Participants’ predicted attitudes were equal to $83.69 + 0.12(\text{training}) - 0.20(\text{experience}) + 0.25(\text{workload})$. In summary, hours of training ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$), years of teaching experience ($\beta = -0.20, p < 0.01$), and hours of workload ($\beta = 0.25, p = 0.02$) were significant predictors of teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>83.20</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours of training</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of experience</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours of workload</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.02</td>
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The first research question related to whether the amount of special education training would predict teacher attitudes towards inclusion of students with special education needs. The results did support this finding ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$), the $\beta$-value indicated that as hours of training increased by one unit, then the teachers’ attitudes increased by 0.12 units. A higher number of training hours in special education were positively correlated with more positive attitudes towards inclusive classrooms. For the second hypothesis, the results indicated that years of teaching experience ($\beta = -0.20, p < 0.01$) was significant; the $\beta$-value indicated that as years of teaching experience decreased by one unit score (e.g., teachers with less experience), then teachers’ attitudes increased by 0.20 units. Teachers who held more positive attitudes towards inclusive classrooms had fewer years of teaching experience. Finally, the last question related to the hours of teachers’ workload as related to attitudes towards inclusion. These results were also significant ($\beta = 0.25, p = 0.02$); the $\beta$-value indicated that as hours of teachers’ workload increased by one unit score, then the teachers’ attitudes increased by 0.25 units. Overall, the researcher found that the teachers’ workload was a significant predictor of the teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion of students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms. Additionally, the results indicated two unexpected findings. First, teachers who reported more hours of workload presented more positive attitudes towards inclusive classrooms. Secondly, data indicated that hours of teachers’ workload was the best predictor of teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive classrooms.

DISCUSSION

Based on previous research, it was expected that teachers with more special education training would hold more favorable attitudes towards the inclusion of students with learning disabilities. The findings from this study supported this expectation as the number of hours of special education training positively predicted teachers’ attitudes towards the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Rakap & Kaczmarek, 2010). Another factor that was believed to affect teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion was their years of teaching experience. Although the literature was somewhat mixed on this issue, it was believed that teachers with fewer years of teaching experience would have more positive attitudes towards inclusion. After the National Educational Act of
Thailand in 1999, every teacher education program began to provide special education or inclusive classrooms courses. Thus, teachers who were educated more recently (i.e., those with less experience) would have had these courses and, as a result, experienced more positive attitudes towards inclusion. An unexpected finding was that teachers’ workload positively predicted attitudes towards inclusive classrooms. The results of this study indicated that if teachers reported having more workload hours, then they held more positive attitudes towards inclusive classrooms. It was suspected that teachers who reported a higher workload, may have worked more with students with disabilities and it was this intimate connection, rather than the hours of workload, that accounted for the more positive attitudes. If this is the case, it would align with the findings from Hoffman (2006) and Kimble (2017), who both found that the more time teachers worked with students with disabilities, the more positive their attitudes were towards inclusive classrooms. This study revealed that Thai secondary teachers generally held positive attitudes towards including students with learning disabilities into general education classrooms. This finding was similar to those of Dapudong (2013) who reported that Thai primary teachers held positive attitudes towards inclusive classrooms. Unfortunately, there was no way to make a direct comparison between the results because the version of the ORI used in this study was quite different from the one used in the Dapudong (2013) study.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

Although the Thai Ministry of Education has tried to address these training needs through various training opportunities, it has not been effective in building a larger teaching workforce that has specialized knowledge of special education. However, helping teachers to understand the importance of expanding and deepening their knowledge about special education and inclusive classrooms might be helpful. In addition, the government and school administrators may need to provide time and financial support in order to motivate teachers to take advantage of this training. Additionally, alternative forms of course delivery such as online platforms and distance learning might be helpful to allow teachers in rural and/or remote areas to attend classes virtually. Along with professional development, school administrators might engage in supporting more experienced teachers in working with students with special needs by providing mentoring, coaching, and consultation from guidance teachers and school psychologists. As noted, the National Educational Act of Thailand in 1999, directed every teacher education program to provide a course on special education or inclusive classrooms. However, teacher candidates may benefit from gaining more direct experience by taking at least one practicum course in an inclusive classroom, examining case studies, or conducting research on students with special needs. These types of experiences may further help future teachers to feel more familiar, confident, and competent to work in inclusive classrooms.

CONCLUSION

As the number of students with special needs increases and the policy of the Ministry of Education in Thailand moves forward towards more inclusive education, it appears evident that teachers will be expected to establish successful and effective inclusive classrooms (Special Education Bureau, 2016). In addition, numerous researchers agree that in order to empower teachers to use inclusive education, they must first have positive attitudes towards inclusion. Thus, the current study was conducted to better understand the variables that are meaningful to teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion. The results demonstrated that Thai secondary teachers generally held positive attitudes towards inclusive classrooms and that the hours of training, years of teaching experience, and hours of workload were significant predictors of these attitudes. However, the results also highlighted the need for more professional development in the area of special education and that very few teachers identified themselves as special education teachers or had more than a few hours of instruction in this area. This study provides initial guidance that should be taken into consideration when exploring policy changes and may ultimately aid the Thai Ministry Education and school practitioners to improve inclusive practices in Thai secondary classrooms.

REFERENCES


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