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A Quantitative Research about Attitudes of Pre-service Teachers on Inclusive Education

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Abstract

In this paper we propose to characterize the inclusive philosophy in Thailand as well as to present and discuss results from a quantitative research carried out within the teacher pre-service context, viewed as one of the components that should be addressed by school systems that seek to be inclusive.

Introduction

Globally, the philosophy and practice of inclusion of students with special educational needs into general education classrooms have been reinforced for the last 30 years by litigation, legislation, international organizations and by advocacy movements. Therefore, nowadays the trend in educating these students is to provide appropriate services in inclusive settings as much as possible (Smith, Pollaway, Patton, & Dowdy, 1995). The implementation of this philosophy increased significantly in the last few years the number of students with special educational needs who are included in the regular school system, which is having impact both in pre and in-service teacher training (Correia & Martins, 2000) as well as in the school system. In fact, within inclusion,

schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups. These conditions create a range of different challenges to school systems. (UNESCO, 1994, p. 6)

Although recently passed legal mandates Thailand is in its first years of implementation of inclusive education, and therefore is still a country in transition in what concerns moving from the idea to the implementation (Vorapanyaa & Dunlap, 2014). In 1999, the National Education Act was passed, which safeguarded the rights of people with special educational needs to education (Office of Special Education Administration, 2014; Vorapanya, & Dunlap, 2014) and in 2008 the Education Provision for People with Disabilities Act became law. This Act mandates that:

(i) inclusive education was to be one of the service delivery options in the education of people with disabilities, (ii) people with disabilities had the right to be included at every level of the educational system in its various forms, (iii) it was unlawful for schools to deny admission to students with disabilities, and (iv) students with disabilities should be provided with an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) with at least yearly updating. (Rajkijjanubaksa 2008, as cited in Vorapanya, & Dunlap, 2014, p. 1015)

Thus, this law requires that in what concerns students with special educational needs:

(1) they shall receive free education from birth or from the diagnosis of disabilities through the rest of their lives, and receive technological and educational materials as needed;

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(1) they shall receive free education from birth or from the diagnosis of disabilities through the rest of their lives, and receive technological and educational materials as needed;

(2) they shall have choice of access to schooling by the abilities, interests, expertise and needs of each individual; and

(3) they shall receive a high standard of education in accredited institutions, including appropriate curriculum design and assessment for their special needs. (Office of Special Education Administration, 2015; Rajkijjanubaksa, 2008, as cited in Vorapanya, & Dunlap, 2014, p. 1016)

According to Bualar (2015) school teachers in Thailand do not have the training needed to support and teach students with special educational needs. In fact, the knowledge about and to support children with special educational needs that is provided in pre- and in-service training programs was considered by international research results an important factor in improving teachers' attitudes towards the implementation of an inclusive practices and policy (Avramidis & Norwich, 2010). Moreover, as Niemeyer and Proctor (2002) underline, the importance of developing positive beliefs and attitudes about inclusion throughout pre-service teaching programs cannot be overstated because teacher beliefs influence the implementation of inclusive practices. Results from several research studies conducted in countries like the USA, Australia, the UK and Portugal tend to emphasize that education qualifications about special education acquired from pre- or in-service courses are associated with less resistance to inclusive practices (Avramidis & Norwich, 2010; Correia & Martins, 2000). Research summarized by Martins (2011), shows that teacher training is one of the critical elements for creating inclusive and effective schools communities. Other elements include, for example: 1) strong leadership, 2) a common philosophy and strategic plan, 3) promotion of school and classroom cultures that welcome, appreciate, and accommodate diversity, 4) support networks, 5) flexibility, 6) accountability, 7) ongoing technical assistance, 8) effective/research based teaching approaches, 9) celebration of success and learning from challenges, and 10) Funding (Porter, 1997; Schaffner & Buswell, 1996). According to Schaffner and Buswell (1996), "these elements are interdependent parts of creating a successful, dynamic, learning community rather than discrete, unrelated components (p. 49).

Within the above-mentioned framework and considering that regular education teachers play important roles in the implementation of inclusive education we conducted a basic research that aimed to describe future teachers' attitudes toward inclusion of students with special educational needs. The goals of the current study, then, were threefold. Our first goal was to describe the attitudes of future teachers regarding the least restrictive environment, the benefit and the impact of inclusion of students with special educational needs in regular schools and in the community. The second one was to identify statistically significance among the independent variables. The final third goal was related to the reliability's coefficient of the results.

Method

Participants

Following a quantitative methodology, we collected data from a convenience sample of 221 university students with an age mean of 21.34 years old, who were enrolled in a program to become teachers in one University in Thailand. In what concerns gender, 154 students were females and 66 were males. Most of them were in their third year of study (see Table 1).

Table 1. Academic year in which each participant was enrolled

Year	n	%
2nd	34	15,4
3rd	117	52,9
4th	35	15,8
5th	34	15,4

In addition, 212 of these participants are characterized by having a past or present contact with children or adults with special educational needs (see Table 2) and 164 by being exposed to information about special needs before this study.

Table 2. Meet children or adult with special educational needs

Meet	n	%
Yes	212	96,4
No	8	3,6

During the survey participants were asked to indicate how likely it is that they will be working with children with special educational needs in their future professional life. Table 3 summarizes the trend of their answers.

Table 3. Probability of working with students with special educational needs

Possibility	n	%
Very much	12	5,5
Moderately	109	49,5
A little bit	76	34,5
Not at all	23	10,5

The subjects with the above-mentioned characteristics participated voluntarily in our study after being informed about the aim of it and signed a consent form, which was also signed by the two researchers.

Data Collection

In this study an English version of the questionnaire entitled "Perception of teachers towards inclusion of students with special educational needs" and developed at the University of Minho, Research Center on Education, by Martins and Santos in 2012, was translated and adapted to Thai by the first author of this article. Data was collected with a paper version of the questioner during the last two weeks of May and first of June, 2015. The questionnaire consists of two parts with a total of 31 items. Part I is related to demographic information and experience of contacting with students with special educational needs, while part II consists of 21 items related to attitudes towards inclusion rated according to a four-point *Likert* scale, from strong disagreement to strong agreement.

Results

Descriptive (frequencies) and inferential (*T-Test and One-Way Anova Test*) statistics were performed. A significance level of 0,05 ($p < 0,05$) was used for inferential statistical decisions. Reliability of results was calculated using the Cronbach's Alpha.

Results show that:

1. In what concerns the environment of education, most of the participants (188) tend to agree and totally agree that students with special educational needs should attend special schools, while 135 agree and totally agree with the inclusion in the regular classroom (see Figure 1).

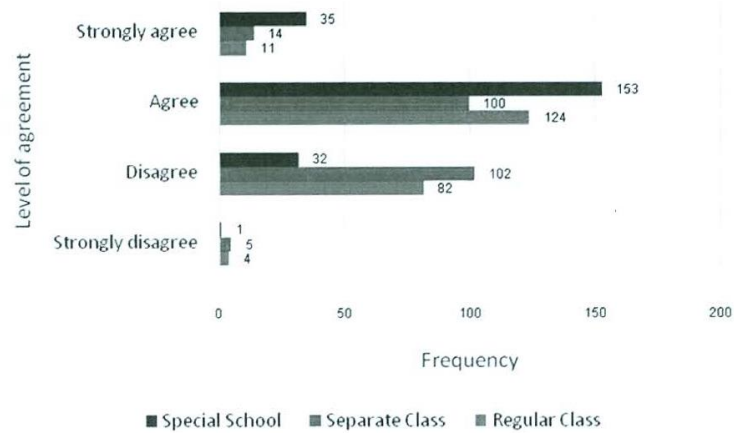


Figure 1. Results for the education environment

2. In terms of the benefits of inclusion, as Figure 2 shows, more participants tend to agree that inclusion is beneficial to the families of students with special educational needs (173) and to the community (166), than that it is beneficial to students with special educational needs (163), or to their teachers (146) or colleagues (140).

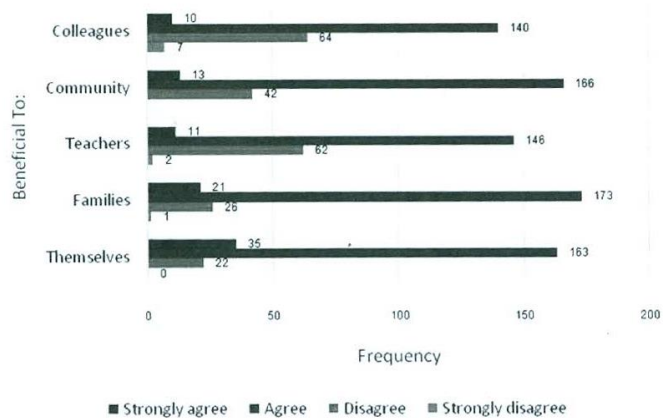


Figure 2. Results for benefits of inclusion by population

3. Attitudes towards inclusion were influenced by the severity of the special educational need. In fact, as the level of severity increases the level of agreement decreases (see Figure 3).

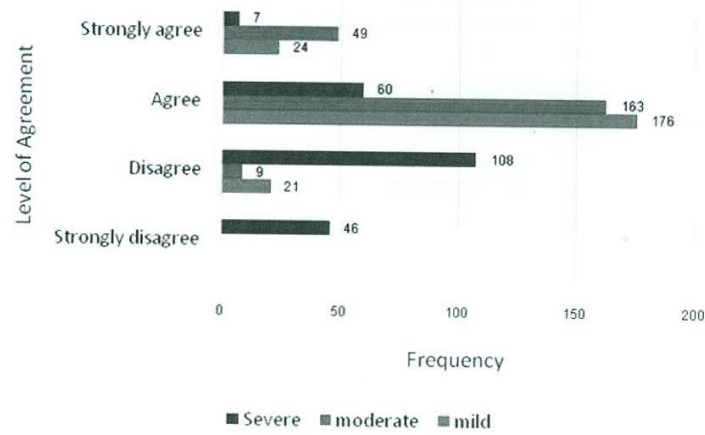


Figure 3. Results for benefits of inclusion by severity of the special educational need

4. Attitudes towards inclusion were influenced by the type of special educational needs. As can be seen from Figure 4, participants tend to agree more with the inclusion of students with physical special needs, behavior problems and dyslexia than to the inclusion of students with hearing, visual and intellectual special needs (see Figure 4).

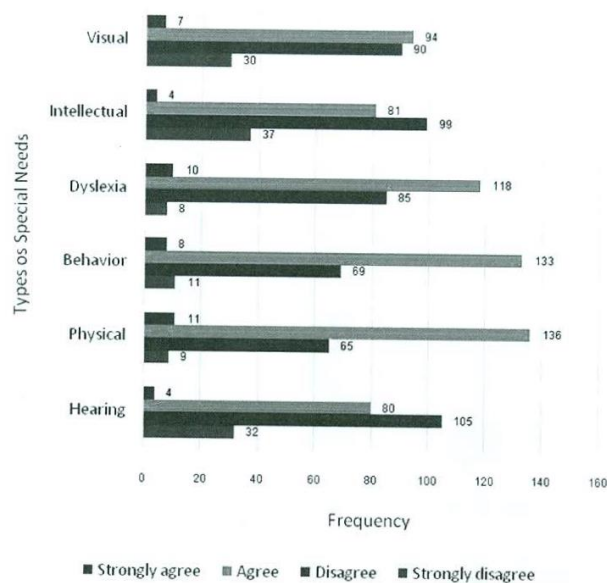


Figure 4. Results for benefits of inclusion by type of special educational needs

5. Generally, future teachers seem to exhibit a more positive attitude towards the benefits of inclusion on social than on academic development (see Figure 5). This item is related to the effectiveness of inclusion and, as other items, it does not focus on impact for specific groups of students with special educational needs. It is related to academic benefits which are central to school participation, as well as to social interactions among these students and school staff, teachers, or colleagues.

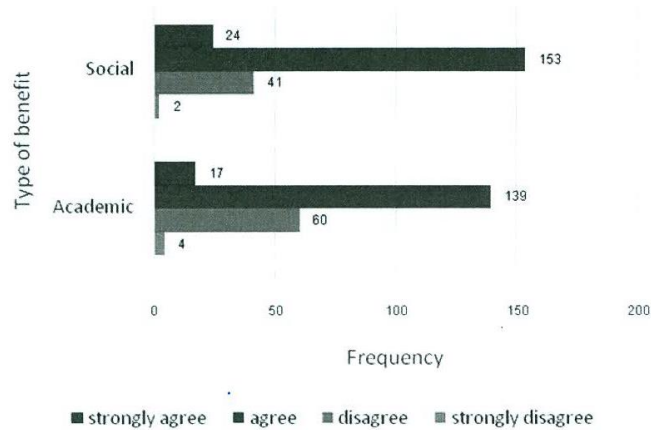


Figure 5. Results for impact of inclusion on academic and social outcomes

6. Most of the future teachers (197) agree and strongly agree with the affirmation that placement of a student with special educational needs into a regular classroom is disruptive to their colleagues (see Figure 6).

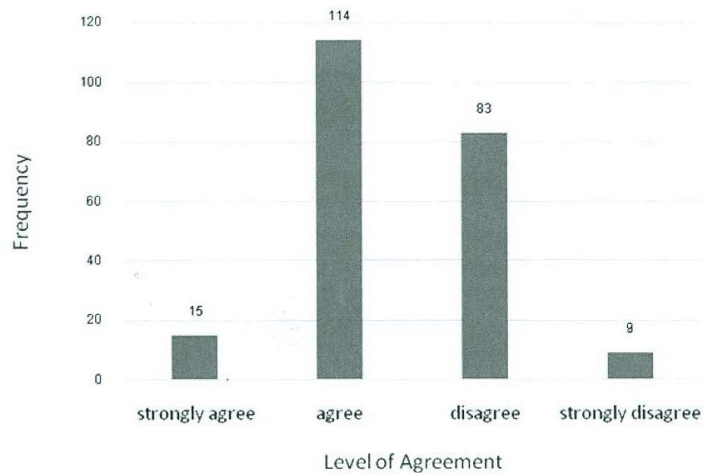


Figure 6. Results for impact on students with no special educational needs

7. There are positive attitudes related to the idea that people with special needs have the right to be included in Thai community. In fact, 80 of the participants surveyed agree with it and 136 strongly agree (see Figure 7).

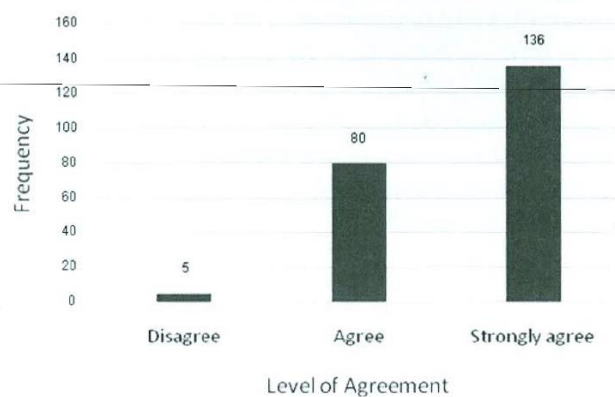


Figure 7. Results for inclusion as a right

8. There were no inferential significance among the independent variables. However, in what concerns the environment of education, females agree more with the frequency of special schools than males. Furthermore, those who are rarely around children with special needs were the ones that have more positive attitudes related to inclusion, while the ones that stated that were always around children with special needs had the less positive ones.

9. The Cronbach's alpha for the 21 items was .812, which indicates that the items on the questionnaire have very good internal consistency reliability for this sample (Leech, Barrett, & Morgan, 2005).

Conclusions and Discussion

From the major findings of this study we would like to underline and discuss the three following conclusions:

1) More than half of the future teachers have a positive attitudes about inclusion of students with special educational needs in regular classes. Such result is consistent with the UNESCO (1994) statement:

Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system. (pp. viii-ix)

In fact, according to Correia (2008) all students with special educational needs have the right to receive a free, appropriated public education, in the least restrictive environment. There are several reasons why the focus of services for students with special educational needs should move from segregated to inclusive environments. These include opportunities for social interaction between students with and without special educational needs, improved academic and social outcomes as well as gains in preparation for community living for students with special educational needs, development of positive attitudes toward diversity, and benefits

for teachers, parents, and community members (Smith et al., 1995; Karagiannis, Stainback, & Stainback, 1996).

2) The level of agreement toward the benefits of inclusion was higher when the items were related to families and to community members. When we discuss the reasons for inclusive practices in terms of benefits to students, teachers, and society, Karagiannis, Stainback, and Stainback (1996) underline that

by educating all students together, persons with disabilities have the opportunity to prepare for life in the community, teachers improve their professional skills, and society makes the conscious decision to operate according to the social value of equality for all people with the consequent results of enhanced social peace. To achieve inclusive schooling, general and special educators and resources must come together in a unified, consistent effort. (p. 3)

Additionally, proponents of inclusion provided the following advantages:

- Reduction of stigma;
- Better understanding across disciplines;
- On-the-job- training for general educators;
- Reduction of mislabeling of students;
- Spillover benefits to all students;
- Suitability of the model to needs of secondary school students;
- Prospect for master teacher staffing in special education (Huefner, 1988, cited in Smith et al., 1995, p. 77-78).

3) There is a strong positive attitude about students with special needs having the right to be included in the Thai community. This means that participants considered such students equally as other citizen in the society. We must underline that the history of educating students with special needs in many countries is related not only to legislation, but also with civil rights movements, and professional and parent organizations (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997; Heward, 2000). Furthermore, "by far the most important reason for inclusive schooling is the social value of equality. We teach students by example that, despite differences, we all have equal rights" (Karagiannis, Stainback, & Stainback, 1996, p. 8).

The above-mentioned results are drawn from a research conducted in one university and with future teachers, it may be helpful to conduct a national research study to understand future and present regular teachers' attitudes toward the education of students with special educational needs, because all children regardless of the type or severity of their special educational needs, shall receive a free and with quality public education. In fact, "we need schools that promote wider social acceptance, peace and cooperation" (Karagiannis, Stainback, & Stainback, 1996, p. 8), and teacher training programs that provide many opportunities for future teachers to develop such values toward inclusion, as well as to prepare them to teach effectively all students in the classroom.

Keywords: inclusive education, quantitative research, special educational needs, pre-service teacher training.

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