

## The Current Situation of the Parents of SEN Students in Lopburi Province, Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

The training aims at: 1) providing essential knowledge to parents of Special Educational Needs (SEN) students in inclusive primary schools in Lopburi Province and 2) learning the parents' perspectives on how to presently work with their children with special needs. Eighty-five inclusive schools, from the first and the second school districts participated out of the pool of all regular public schools in Lopburi Province by suggesting parents' volunteer to participate in these training sessions. Two parents of SEN students from each school were allowed to attend the trainings. The first school district had 80 parents attending from 40 inclusive schools, while the second school district had 89 parents joining the training from 45 inclusive schools, equating to 169 total participating parents. Qualitative research reports from the parents' sharing and brainstorming session emerged into three different themes accordingly: 1) knowing more rights and support for their children, 2) have better knowledge, increase awareness, and a better understanding for living with children with special needs, and 3) managing children with disabilities as if this was a result of their "Bad Karma."

**Keywords:** Bad Karma; Disabilities; SEN, Unfortunate life

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## INTRODUCTION

The training projects were organized from the results of our previous research study, in 2016-2017. In that previous study, sponsored by a grant from the Thai government to conduct research, entitled: “Policy into Practice for Inclusive Schools in Lopburi Province”, we found parents of students with special educational needs (SEN) were in need of being trained to understand the fundamentals of disabilities so that they could be able to work with their children with special needs. The study reported: parents lived in a rural area, far away from the center of the province, confessing that they live abandoned with what they do not know. The parents possessed little knowledge to understand the complication of the disabilities that their children had. They did not have any idea about how to support their children, they were illiterate and were in a low socio-economic status; additionally, they had wrong ideas about the origins of their children’s disabilities (Vorapanya and Pachanavon, 2017).

While searching for a sponsorship, the researcher fortunately met with the director of the funds-sponsor named the Thai Kind Mutual Fund, known as “BKIND”, which is an organization for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of Bangkok Bank, a major bank in Thailand. There were kindhearted considerations from BKIND, willing to grant researcher funds to conduct training projects for uplifting quality of life in Thailand. These training projects occurred to help the group of parents of SEN students in Lopburi area who were in need of support. The training projects aimed at: 1) providing the basic knowledge to the parents of SEN students in Lopburi ’s inclusive primary schools and 2) learning about the parents’ situation towards working with special-needs children.

## TRAINING FRAMEWORK

Since this study was training, the researcher designed curriculum for training in a series of two parts. The first day of training provided knowledge to parents of children with special needs and the second day was spent acquiring thoughts from parents’ brainstorming. For providing knowledge, the researcher prepared parents to learn types of disabilities, according to the Thai disability law, meaning that the parents attending the training would be taught to understand types of disabilities so that they could screen categories that best describe their own children, and will be better able to assist the children according to the disability. On the second day of training, the researcher implemented methods for parents to deal with their children with special needs and later encouraged parents to express their thoughts and opinions to the group sharing and brainstorming.

According to the Bureau of Special Education Administration (Thai Bureau of Special Education Administration, 2008), the Thai disability law lists nine types of disabilities: 1) Visual Impairment; 2) Hearing Impairment; 3) Intellectual Disabilities; 4) Physical or Health-Related Impairment; 5) Learning Disabilities (LD); 6) Speech and Language Impairment; 7) Behavioral and Emotional Disorder; 8) Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); and 9) Multiple Disabilities.

However, the majority of SEN students in Lopburi Province have psychiatric disabilities. The training thus focused on providing support towards four types of

disabilities ranging from Learning Disabilities (LD), Intellectual Disabilities, Emotional and Behavioral Disorder, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The researcher designed curriculum for this training within these four types of disabilities for participants. Those types of physical disabilities were not included in this training because students were in special provincial institutes, not in the basic education system of the Ministry of Education, and they also were not the focus of this training project.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### *Location*

Lopburi Province is located in the central region of Thailand. It is about a two-hour drive north, from Bangkok. It was once an ancient capital-city about three-hundred years ago under the reign of the Maharaja (Great King) Narai. Lopburi Province is a center for higher education in the lower central region of Thailand where university education serves student-populations from seven surrounding provinces, and is the work-base for the researcher. BKIND funds allowed us to conduct research in the service area of the university.

### *Participants*

These two training-seminars specifically focused upon the parents of SEN students at the basic education level, meaning that the parents of SEN students in primary inclusive schools in Lopburi Province were the participants of these training projects. The researcher designated 40 inclusive school participants out of the pool of all regular public schools from the first school district and 45 inclusive school participants out of the pool of all regular public schools from the second school district in Lopburi Province by asking people to volunteer, in order to obtain participants.

Two parents from each school were allowed to attend the training. The first school district had 80 parents attending from 40 inclusive schools and the training was held at Lopburi Inn Resort, located in Mounng District, Lopburi Province; while the second school district had 89 parents from 45 inclusive schools joining the training and the session was organized at Ton-Palm Inn Resort, located in Chaibadan District, Lopburi Province. The total amount of participants from the two school districts were 169 parents.

### *Training Periods*

The first round was organized for the parents of the first Lopburi school district for two days during the weekend of 24-25 June 2017. The second round was held for parents of the second Lopburi school district for two days of the weekend of 1-2 July 2017. The trainers were composed of three specialists in the field of Special Education and Inclusive Education. The first trainer, was Dr. Prapasri Nunnaroumite, who is a senior registered nurse and a director of the Child Development Center at Chulalongkorn Hospital. She has specifically worked with children with special needs for more than twenty-five years. The second instructor was Teacher Ratee Somnoek, who has a long history of experience working with SEN students in primary inclusive classrooms for nearly twenty years and lastly

was Asst. Prof. Dr. Sermsap Vorapanya, who is a university lecturer and a researcher in the field of inclusive education for fifteen years.

#### *Training Protocols*

- a) The parents sat in the training hall in a classroom setting when the first trainer, Dr. Prapasri Nunnaroumite delivered a PowerPoint slide-lecture with video clips of types of psychiatric disabilities, on the first day.
- b) On the second day, parents were put into groups for song-and-games activities as well as getting therapeutic advice for dealing with children with special needs at home, with Teacher Ratre Somnoek, in the morning; then with Asst. Prof. Dr. Sermsap Vorapanya in the afternoon, they were encouraged to share their experience from living with their children, by being stimulated with such questions as: Do they know what kind of disabilities their kids have? What have they done to help their children? Do they have support from the government and communities? How have they felt about having children with special needs?

## **RESULTS**

Qualitative research from the sharing and brainstorming sessions, from the two different groups of parents, similarly reflected three aspects:

### 1) Knowing more rights and support for their children:

parents reported that they have learned more about children-rights, especially that schools must include children with special needs, without denial. Parents realized from attending the training that their children missed opportunities provided by disability-laws, long before the feeling of raising their children with special needs alone occurred. After knowing that there was support from the government and communities around them, they hope to stand strong for their children. They confessed that they were more confident now to bring their children out into the communities. Parents comprehend more support is out there from the community and people around. They learned that they could consult with specialist in the community hospital and that their children could be transferred to upper tier hospitals in case their children had more complex disabilities. They realized that their children could find support from some non-profit organizations offering to help reduce parent-burden. They recognized the support from schools in their communities and the Special Education Office of Lopburi Province who helps to facilitate these parents in terms of providing learning materials. Their realization about support systems outside of home relieves tension from long periods of dealing with their special needs children.

### 2) Have better knowledge, increase awareness, and a better understanding for living with children with special needs:

parents accepted that the knowledge gained from attending training helped them to have a clearer picture towards working with their special-needs children. The most beneficial aspect was understanding to sort out the type of their child's disability. Once knowing the types, parents could move on to understand the developmental level of their child as some of the children involved deeper behavioral concerns. Within groups, the parents shared their feelings in a stressful

manner at the beginning and later appeared in a more relaxed mind-state. They confessed that new knowledge and the basic therapy that they learned from the training would help them to foster their children; and many parents stated that they were now educated, for example:

- a) Parents learned to accept that their children were different than those children without special needs and being different is not a fault, once they come into the stage of acceptance, the stage of denial was withdrawn and that meant their minds were opened and receptive to accept support from others.
- b) Parents learned to comprehend the relevant needs for their child's ability, they realized to reduce expectation and allow the child to develop at their own pace, with the family members' kind support.
- c) Parents admitted that they were stressed from not knowing how to deal with their child, not knowing how to help them to get better, and thought of the child's future. However, they found out from sharing with others in the group that being stress-free and being kind to comfort the child when the child threw a tantrum or had some problematic behavior had a more positive outcome than giving a negative response back towards their child.
- d) Parents knew that pleasant communication between parent and child may offer a better choice within the relationship and this way of thinking could reduce a child's temper-swings or negative behavior, therefore parents confessed that they found out how to build up better family situations.
- e) Finally, parents discovered that having a child with special needs was not the end of the world. They found other people in the group were in the same situation and that they could benefit from networking.

### 3) Managing children with disabilities as if this was a result of their "Bad Karma":

Most people in Thailand are Buddhists and they have a belief in 'karma'. Many parents mention a sin that they might have done in a previous life that resulted in them becoming poor and having a child with a disability. Moreover, the low socio-economic status of the majority of parents and the shortage of opportunity to access to education caused them to obsess into thinking about 'bad karma', usually in negative ways. They insulted themselves and their unfortunate lives without finding better ways to overcome perceived burdens. With this preoccupation, parents forgot that children need priority-care. Parents merely let the children grow up with less emotional and physical support, since they believed their child would not get any better.

The interpretation of having bad karma was interesting, due to it reported by many parents, suggesting: they must wait for the next life to have better lives; some parents reported to wait for their children to get free of an 'occupied-spirit'. This idea came from the belief that their children had bad karma, and had to endure in this state over an extended period. Once the period ended, children would be free from the trapped-spirit. Some parents were miserable from being illiterate, mentioning they could not teach and help their children at home to make progress and this challenge caused fear for the future of their children. They were too overwhelmed with bad luck in life and could not get away with the grief.

The challenging behavior of special-needs children causes families to stress. Without understanding how to deal with a child with special needs, parents are anxious within a chaotic family situation, thinking the issue will never end. Parents were afraid of taking their child into the community, and this was thought of as the reason for keeping their children at home, to avoid embarrassing situations. Some reported that their children with aggressive behavior would become victims of mob-behavior by disapproving community-members, so taking them out is never desirable. However, parents still need their special-needs child to be acquainted with other children in the community so that they could be accepted as community members. Parents hope their special needs children will be given loving-kindness and compassion by community members.

## DISCUSSION

Parents know for themselves that they are the best people to support their child's development, rights, protections and benefits by humanity's principles and law (White, Taylor, & Moss, 1992), while they also know their rights when needing a support system for their special-needs child, as explained in the 'Ecological System Theory' of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998). During our training sessions, we realized parents hoped that learning new knowledge in training sessions would be useful to bring back to their children, to work with them as best as they can within the limitation of their socio-economic status and opportunity in life. We were aware of the sustainability of the knowledge implemented to their children. From sharing, we could see parents were in need of both emotional and intellectual support. They expressed shock, anxiety and depression through their eyes and in how they acted out during group sharing activities, similar to the five stages of loss when people encounter unpleasant situation, according to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005). Parent anxiety seemed not to be systematically supported by their own families and community, instead they thought of spiritual assistance.

Additionally, parents asked for loving-kindness and compassion from society, but in turn gave less to their children even though children with disabilities function better with good parents and family members. Compassion in western societies is an active ethic, where equality is given to all community-members, a morality derived from the American civil rights era, which remains useful for creating awareness toward children with special needs and to fight against discrimination toward children with disabilities, and children with disabilities within school systems (Korstad & Lichtenstein, 1988). While Thais tended to desire compassion and sympathy from others instead of initiating anything that may be supportive or beneficial to children rights and equality; these passive values never demonstrate elevating quality of life for children, as they would hope for, in the end.

Parents appeared to have a misconception over the term 'karma', thinking it activated this miserable-existence with raising a child with disabilities. The intense belief of a spirit catching their children, worried us as researcher because this reflects possession of a wrong belief-system, causing parents to be unrealistic in finding ways to heal trouble stemming from ignorance about managing special-needs children. Parents only waited for the fortune to come and assistance to solve

problems (Payutto, 2015). Parents who waited for luck may never accept to learn anything new towards better supporting the child. With this mentality, they could not move on, but just waited for support from others and leaned on the fortune of life, similar to the research of Samedhi, Chanthathong and Kerdchor (2008), suggesting Thais are overwhelmed with unfortunate circumstances, or listen to what society says about them, instead of developing and practicing good-karma for the sake of an improved or desired future. They tended to blame previous bad karma without looking at what they should do for constructing present-karma. This thought traps them into feeling loss and being looked down upon by others. If they knew of methods to perceive life more positively, they could attain self-esteem on par with others.

## CONCLUSION

Two training sessions were successful towards attracting parents of children with special needs in the provincial-area to attend and allow the community to create shared awareness towards these children. Training met the criteria of the grant's owner for lifting up quality of life for Thais. Even though the researcher cannot verify any accomplishments within the homes of parents' implementing suggestions; indeed, there was a learning curve displayed through what the parents possessed after attending our training session. At least they had a chance to open their eyes to a new world, seeing how other parents performed for children with special needs. We were quite certain that the obstructions of fear and hopeless would fade away, now that they know there is local support, and they are not alone in their circumstance.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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