

DEVELOPING ATTITUDES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS TOWARDS PEERS WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISORDER THROUGH CREATIVE STORIES

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Abstract

This research was aimed at (1) investigating the attitudes of upper primary school students towards peers with specific learning disorder, and (2) examining the effect of creative stories on the attitudes of upper primary school students towards peers with specific learning disorder. To investigate the attitudes of the students, two hundred sixty-nine Grade 4-6 students in Bangkok, Thailand, responded to a three-point scale questionnaire. It was found that the students generally had positive attitudes towards peers with specific learning disorder, although there were some negative attitudes related to misunderstanding specific learning disorder. Compared to non-academic oriented activities, the number of students with positive attitudes towards interacting and supporting students with specific learning disorder decreased when the activities were academic oriented. To examine the effect of creative stories on the attitudes of upper primary school students, ten students from one classroom from each grade (Grades 4-6) were purposely selected from a school in Bangkok, Thailand. The students read two stories that were developed for this study in order to address the areas of attitudes that should be further promoted. The results showed that the students' scores from the attitude questionnaire increased significantly after reading the books, indicating that creative stories could be used to promote positive attitudes of students towards peers with specific learning disorder.

Keywords: Attitude; reading difficulty; specific learning disorder

Introduction

While international countries are working towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG) to provide inclusive and equitable quality education for all by the year 2030, the goal cannot be successfully achieved unless “persons with disabilities are equally included as both agents and beneficiaries” (United Nations, 2018). Thailand has also participated in the global partnership to achieve the goal, by promoting inclusive education for children with disabilities. From 2014 to 2017, the number of children with disabilities in regular schools in Thailand has increased from 200,499 to 379,572, while the number of children with disabilities in special schools in Thailand in 2017 was 12,880 (Office of the Education Council, 2019).

The attitudes of regular students towards peers with disabilities are important for successful inclusive inclusion. de Boer et al. (2012) reviewed 20 selected studies on this topic, conducted in seven different countries, focusing on primary school students. It was found that the attitudes of primary school students towards peers with disabilities were generally neutral. However, the researchers explained that the neutral attitudes may contain variance, meaning some students might have positive attitudes while some might have negative attitudes. In addition, despite the limited number of studies, the studies revealed that there was a positive relationship between attitudes and social participation of students with disabilities. Promoting positive attitudes towards students with disabilities is, therefore, crucial for successful inclusion of students with disabilities in regular settings (de Boer et al., 2012).

Specific learning disorder, also referred to as a learning disorder or learning disability, is a neurodevelopmental disorder resulting in ongoing problems in one of three fundamental areas of learning: reading, writing and math (American Psychiatric Association, 2019). It is considered one of the educationally related disabilities according to the Thai Ministry of Education (Thai Ministry of Education, 2009) and the rights of students with specific learning disorder are protected under the Thai Education Provision for Persons with Disabilities Act, B.E. 2551 (Office of the Council of State, 2008). The number of primary school students with specific learning disorder was 242,547

out of the total of 4,761,465 primary school students in Thailand (Office of the Education Council, 2018).

There has been limited research on students' attitudes towards peers with specific learning disorder, particularly in Thailand. Studies on this topic conducted in Thailand were not found in the major national and international databases. However, Brook and Geva (2001) found that high school students' attitudes towards peers with a learning disability were more positive than peers with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Despite the tolerant attitudes towards peers with a learning disability, the study found that 22.5 percent of the students responded that students with a learning disability had lower than average IQ, 44.2 percent responded that a learning difficulty would disappear overtime, and 9.6 percent responded that students with a learning disability should attend a special school.

The use of children's literature to promote positive attitudes in students' towards persons with disabilities is suggested in several academic literature (e.g., Artman-Meeker et al., 2016; Kurtts and Gavigan, 2017; Matthew and Clow, 2007; Ostrosky et al., 2015; Prater, 2000; Prater et al., 2006). However, there have been only a few research studies conducted on the topic. The findings were also inconsistent as to whether the use of children's literature could positively influence the attitudes of regular students towards persons with disabilities.

Out of the 138 journal articles published during 2000-2019, located in the ERIC database using the key words 'children's literature' and 'disability' or 'special needs', only one study that specifically focused on this topic was found. Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) selected two existing published children books, each of which was about a boy with a learning disability (i.e., reading difficulties). The 14 Grade 5 students participating in the study chose one of the books to read for a period of four weeks and met with one of the researchers each week to discuss the book. The study found an insignificant increase in positive attitudes towards peers with learning disability. The researchers explained that the preconception and prior knowledge of regular students towards peers with disability may have inhibited the attitude change and suggested that a study conducted with an increase in the intensity and the duration of the intervention was needed.

Through expanding the search, by locating the studies on the topic cited in the 138 journal articles, six studies were found dated back to 1981. Five of the papers (i.e., Adomat, 2014; Artman-Meeker et al., 2016; Favazza and Odom, 1997; Salend and Moe, 1983; Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, 1996) found a positive influence of children's literature on the attitudes of children towards persons with disabilities. However, three of the studies combined other activities with the reading of children's literature (Favazza and Odom, 1997; Salend and Moe, 1983; Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, 1996) and one was qualitative research whose findings were based on interviews with the subjects (Adomat, 2014).

In the study by Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1996), 71 kindergarten and Grade 1 students participated in the reading of six children's books, containing main characters with disabilities, and in book related activities (e.g., art experiences, retelling stories with puppets, and listening to guest speakers). It was found that the attitudes of the students towards children with disabilities were positively influenced by the book reading and the activities. Favazza and Odom (1997) assigned 16 kindergarten students to a 'no contact' group, 15 to a 'low contact' group (i.e., had contact with children with disabilities during breaks and activities), and 15 to a 'high contact' group. The students in the high contact group attended three 15-minute story time sessions each week, listening to and discussing stories about children with disabilities. They also took one of the books read in class home each week for their parents to read to them and participated in 15-minute structured free play activities with students with disabilities three times a week. The study found that a significant increase in acceptance of children with disabilities was shown only in the high contact group. Salend and Moe (1983) conducted a study with 240 Grade 4-6 students, assigning them into one control group (no treatment) and two experimental groups. While the students in one experiment group were read books about individuals with disabilities without discussions about the books, the students in the other group were read the same books and participated in activities such as explanation, discussion, and simulation about disabilities. Significant positive change in the attitudes was found only in the group using both books about individuals with disabilities and the activities. In the only

qualitative study found, Adomat (2014) collected data in two multi-age classrooms, one with 27 Grade 2-Grade 3 students (including 6 students with disabilities), and one with 25 Grade 4 - Grade 5 students (including five students with disabilities). During the whole class read-aloud and small group audio and video recorded discussion sessions, eighteen books about disabilities were used. It was found, through the discussion and students' and parents' interviews, that the students had a deeper understanding of peers with disabilities, and some of them became volunteers in a community therapy group.

Two of the studies did not find positive influences of children's literature on students' attitudes towards persons with disabilities (i.e., Beardsley, 1981; Sipsas-Herrmann, 1996). Beardsley (1981) assigned Grade 3 classrooms, each of which had at least 17 regular students and four students with special needs, to one experimental group, and two control groups. The students in the experimental groups were read to every other day with one of the total seven children's fiction books featuring regular children interacting with children with disabilities. While the students in one of the control groups listened to an audio tape describing differences among people, the other control group received no treatment. The study found that the use of children's fiction had little impact on the attitude of students towards children with a disability. Sipsas-Herrmann (1996) conducted a study involving 247 Grade 4-6 regular students in order to determine the effects of fiction and non-fiction on the attitudes of regular students towards persons with disabilities. After the treatment of using fiction or non-fiction books, the students also participated in a group discussion. It was found that there were no significant changes in the attitudes of the students in both the fiction and the non-fiction groups, except for the Grade 6 non-fiction group. The group showed moderate significant improvement in their attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

Although there are only a limited number of studies on students' attitudes towards peers with specific learning disorder, the findings indicated there might be areas of attitudes that should be investigated further, particularly in Thai sociocultural context. The use of children's literature to promote positive attitudes in students towards peers with disabilities is supported in several academic literature. However, the few studies on the topic led to inconclusive

findings as to whether children's literature could positively change the attitudes towards peers with disabilities. In examining the studies, all of them used existing commercially published books which may not address the specific aspects of attitudes that need further improvement, especially in the Thai sociocultural context. Therefore, this research aims to examine attitudes of primary school students towards peers with specific learning disorder, developing creative stories in order to promote positive attitudes of primary school students towards peers with specific learning disorder, and investigate the effects of creative stories in promoting positive attitudes in students towards peers with specific learning disorder.

Phase 1: Examining Students Attitudes Towards Peers with Disability

A quantitative method with questionnaire was used to examine students' attitudes towards peers with specific learning disorder. This section discusses research instrument, sampling and procedure, results, and discussion relevant to the research aim.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire begins with a brief description of a hypothetical classmate named Dang. The name was chosen as it can belong to a boy or a girl. Dang has difficulties with reading and writing. However, when math questions are read to Dang, she/he can give correct answers quickly. Dang is also very creative in art class. It should be noted that a learning difficulty in math is not included in this study.

The first part is an adjective checklist adapted from Siperstein's (1980, cited in McNicholas, 2010). The adapted checklist consists of 14 positive and 14 negative adjectives. Students are to choose as many adjectives as they would like that they think best describe Dang.

The second part is an attitude scale adapted from Shared Activities Questionnaire (SAQ) (Morgan et al., 2017). Items added were such as 'I will be in the same group with Dang when writing a report' and 'I will be in the same group with Dang in art activities'. It was added because, according to a study by Siperstein et al. (2007), students had more positive attitudes towards working

with students with disabilities in non-academic activities than in academic activities.

The attitude questionnaire in this study was reviewed by university lecturers from five areas of study (1) special education, (2) educational psychology, (3) Thai language teaching, (4) educational research, (5) educational assessment and evaluation. All items have IOC of at least 0.60.

Sampling and Procedure

Three schools were chosen by purposive sampling, each of which is from the three main types of schools in Bangkok, Thailand: one school under Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, one school under the Ministry of Education, and one private school. Then, one classroom from each grade from Grade 4-6 was randomly chosen from each school (i.e., nine classrooms in total). The class teachers distributed the questionnaire to the students, along with an explanatory letter and a consent form, and collected the questionnaire and the consent form from the students.

Results

The five adjectives that the highest number of students chose were adjectives with negative meanings including (1) slow (74.7%) (2) pitiful¹ (64.3%) (3) strange (47.6%) (4) lazy (43.9%) (5) immature (41.3%) (Table 1). The highest percentage of students responded ‘yes’ to ‘I will be Dang’s friend’ (85.1%), followed by ‘I will share snacks and toys with Dang’ (81.8%), and ‘I will let Dang borrow my things’ (79.6%) (Table 2). The lowest percentage of students responded ‘yes’ to ‘I will spend time outside school with Dang’ (28.3%), followed by ‘I will be in the same group with Dang when writing a report’ (33.8%), and ‘I will be in the same group with Dang during science projects’ (37%).

¹ The adjective ‘pitiful’ here refers to the Thai word ‘nasongsarn’. This adjective is included as it is often associated with disability in Thai culture (Naemiratch and Manderson, 2009). The word ‘songsarn’ is difficult to be fully translated into other languages, however it often means ‘pity’ or ‘feeling sorry for someone’. While ‘songsarn’ is a noun or a verb, ‘nasongsarn’ is an adjective meaning ‘pitiful’.

Table 1: Adjectives Most Frequently Chosen by the Students

Adjective	Frequency	Percent
Slow	201	74.7
Pitiful	173	64.3
Strange	128	47.6
Lazy	118	43.9
Immature	111	41.3

Discussion

The five adjectives most frequently chosen by the students were negative adjectives (i.e., slow, pitiful, strange, lazy, and immature), indicating that the students had some negative attitudes and misunderstanding towards peers with specific learning disorder. Most of the students were willing to be friends with students with specific learning disorder (85.1%) and support students with specific learning disorder in different ways such as lending things to (81.8%) and sharing snacks or toys with students with specific learning disorder (79.6%). They were also willing to support students with specific learning disorder with academically related tasks such as explaining things to students with specific learning disorder (77%). However, the lowest percentage of the students were willing to spend time outside of school with students with specific learning disorder (28.3%). The low percentage could indicate a negative attitude, but it was also possible that primary school students in Bangkok might not spend a lot of time outside of school together due to their young age and the heavy traffic condition in the city. In accordance with the study by Siperstein et al. (2007), this study found that the number of students who were willing to work in the same group as students with specific learning disorder in academically related tasks (i.e., writing reports: 33.8%, and science projects; 37%) was substantially lower than in non-academic tasks (i.e., art activities 67.3%). The findings revealed that, to improve classroom participation for students with specific learning disorder, regular students need to be supported to be willing to work with their peers with specific learning disorder during academic activities, especially those which their peers are not good at.

Table 2: Students' Responses Regarding Shared Activities with Dang

Statement	Yes	Not Sure	No	No responses
I will be Dang's friend.	229(85.1%)	34(12.6%)	4(1.5%)	2(7%)
I will let Dang borrow my things.	220(81.8%)	41(15.2%)	8(3%)	0
I will share snacks and toys with Dang.	214(79.6%)	48(17.8%)	6(2.2%)	1(4%)
In class, I will explain things to Dang if he/she doesn't understand sometimes.	207(77%)	56(21%)	6(2.2%)	0
I will be in the same group with Dang during art activities.	181(67.3%)	72(26.8%)	16(5.9%)	0
I will be in the same group with Dang during science projects.	101(37%)	141(52.4%)	27(10%)	0
I will be in the same group with Dang when writing a report.	91(33.8%)	143(53.2%)	34(12.6%)	1(4%)
I will spend time outside of school with Dang	76(28.3%)	140(52%)	53(19.7%)	0

Phase 2: Investigating the Effect of Creative Stories on the Attitudes of Primary School Students Towards Peers with Specific Learning Disorder

This research was a quasi-experiment, using pretest-posttest design. This section describes research tools, sampling, procedure, results, and discussion.

Research Tools

The tools of the study included (1) the attitude questionnaire described in Phase 1, with the total score of 90 (2) two short stories and (3) a short story interview form.

Short stories. Two short stories were specifically developed for this study: 'The Blank Letters', and 'The Journey of Lookkang'. The researcher attempted to address the areas of attitudes that should be promoted based on the findings from Phase 1. Three experts, including one lecturer in special education, one lecturer in Thai language teaching, and one short story and novel writer, were asked to review and give advice on improving the stories. The

comments from the experts were to 1) shorten the stories by reducing description to make them easier to read for students, and 2) to correct a few phrases according to Thai grammatical structures. The improvements were made to the stories, and all the three experts gave approval for the stories to be used for the experiment.

‘The Blank Letters’ is a story about Saifon and Tonkla who have been friends since kindergarten. Tonkla had moved to a big city faraway and years had passed. Saifon’s reading and writing had improved over time, and she enjoyed writing to her best friend, Tonkla. Although Tonkla responded to all her letters, his responses were very brief, with pictures and small tokens that Saifon did not understand the meaning of. Saifon was increasingly unsure whether Tonkla wanted to continue their friendship. One day, the two children got to meet again and Saifon learned something she had never known about Tonkla.

The purposes of the stories are to explain what specific learning disorder is and to improve the understanding that students with specific learning disorder are not ‘slow’, ‘pitiful’, ‘strange’, or ‘lazy’. The character Tonkla is portrayed positively as an intelligent, athletic, and caring friend who was working hard to read and write.

‘The Journey of Lookkang’ is a six A4 page story which takes place in a fantasy world. Lookkang is a boy who is good at everything, including studying and riding dragons. He had a seemingly perfect life, having experienced little difficulties, and thus did not think much about other people’s difficulties. In a mission that all students had to complete to finish school, Lookkang travelled to a faraway island. The people on the island spoke the same language as he did, but they used a different script. However, the riddles that Lookkang had to solve relied on his ability to read the island’s script. On his mission, he learnt about the importance of kindness and friendship, and that everyone had positive qualities. In delaying judgement, he might find friendship that he had always needed.

Short story interview form. The purpose of the form was to examine whether the students read both stories and understood the plots. The researchers asked the students to retell the stories and checked whether the students mentioned the main events that occurred in the story. If the students could not

name more than half of the main events, the students' scores were not included in the analysis.

Sampling

One classroom from each grade from Grade 4-6 in a Bangkok Metropolitan school was chosen by the school, based on the criteria that the classroom was a mixed ability classroom. In a similar manner to Phase 1, the class teachers distributed the questionnaire to all the students in the classroom. The scores were calculated to be used for assigning students into groups, and as pre-test scores. The participants in the study were 30 Grade 4 to Grade 6 students (10 students, five girls and five boys, from each grade) who scored the lowest on the questionnaire and whose parents gave permission for them to participate.

Procedure

The researcher met the students in groups of 10, classified by grade, to give the students a package consisting of (1) a short-written instruction on one A4 page (2) two short stories printed as two black and white illustrated B5 sized books (3) a list of questions. The written instruction given to the students was the same as the one given by the researcher during the meetings. The students had two weeks to read the stories and they could read them any time outside of the classroom. The students were informed that they did not have to write their responses to the list of questions provided for them. The questions were to help them remember what happened in the story. The questions focused only on what happened but not on what the stories meant or what the students thought about the stories. They would meet the researcher after two weeks to discuss the stories.

After two weeks, each class teacher gave the students the questionnaire to complete, at a time that was convenient to the teachers and the students. The researcher individually interviewed the students, asking them to recall what happened in the stories. The researcher gave prompts for the students to continue or to elaborate, such as 'What happened when Saifon found out the truth?' or 'What happened while Lookkang was travelling back to his city?'. The scores from the questionnaires of the students who could not name more than half of the main events in the stories were excluded from further data analysis.

Results

It was found that there was a total of six students, four Grade 4 students (four boys) and two Grade 5 students (one girl and one boy), who were not able to name more than half of the main events in the stories, and thus their scores were removed from further analysis (Table 3). When comparing the pre-test and the post-tests scores, the mean scores of the students increased from 51.13 to 59.71 (Table 4).

A dependent t-test was conducted to determine the differences between pre-test and post-test scores. According to Eddington (2015), the differences between the pairs of scores, as well as the scores themselves, need to be normally distributed. In this study, the pre-test scores, the post-test scores, and the differences between the pre-tests and post-tests scores were normally distributed ($p > 0.5$). The analysis revealed the post-test scores ($M = 59.71$, $SE = 1.27$) were significantly higher than the pre-test scores, $M = 51.13$, $SE = .62$, $t(23) = -5.49$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.75$ (Table 5).

Table 3: Number of Participants after the Book Reading

Total	Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Number of students	24	5	1	4	4	5

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of the Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Full score = 90	\bar{x}	SD	Median	Range
Pre-test	51.13	2.99	52	14(42-56)
Post-test	59.71	6.22	60	20(49-69)

Table 5: The Results of the Dependent T-test

\bar{x}	SE	SE Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig.
			Lower	Upper			
Pre - Post	-8.6	7.7	1.6	-11.8	-5.3	-5.5	.23 .00

Discussion

There were six students that could not name the main events of the stories, and the reasons were not clearly known. It could be that the stories were too long or not interesting to the students. The researcher chose to distribute the stories to the students and had the students read the books on their own so that they voluntarily read the stories and constructed their own meanings. However, organizing activities and discussion activities might help students to better understand the stories.

This study found that the students' attitudes significantly improved after reading the stories, indicating that creative stories could be used to promote positive attitudes of students towards peers with disabilities, in accordance with previous academic literature (e.g., Artman-Meeker et al., 2016; Kurtts and Gavigan, 2017; Matthew and Clow, 2007; Ostrosky et al., 2015; Prater, 2000; Prater et al., 2006). This study focused on improving the attitudes of students towards peers with specific learning disorder. Further studies should be conducted on improving attitudes of students towards peers with more significant disabilities. In addition, conducting a similar study using a control group involving students reading books not relating to the topic might reduce confounding effects of the study.

While previous studies on this topic showed mixed results, this study showed that creatively written stories for children could significantly promote positive attitudes in students. This study is among the first research studies to develop stories that specifically address the areas of attitudes that need to be enhanced. It supported the use of children's literature in promoting positive attitudes towards disabilities. Teachers should, however, attempt to understand the areas of students' attitudes that need to be addressed and select the books that are relevant to the needs of the students.

Conclusion

Reading children's books is common practice when teaching primary school students. This study revealed that this practice could help promote positive attitudes in students towards peers with disabilities. However, understanding students' attitudes is important to successfully promote the

positive attitudes. In addition, teachers should select appropriate books for students with careful consideration. One challenge is that there are a limited number of Thai children's books that portray characters with disabilities accurately and respectfully. Developing such books could be helpful in reducing misconceptions regarding children with disabilities.

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