

# STUDYING THE CURRENT SITUATION OF SCREENING, PROVIDING ASSISTANCE, AND MONITORING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN THAILAND

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## ABSTRACT

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This article examines the current situation of screening, providing assistance, and monitoring elementary school students with learning disabilities in Thailand. This research applies a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to study existential ontology by gaining an understanding of the personal experience individuals undergo. 70 Thai Language teachers, special education teachers, guidance counsellors, and school administrators were surveyed. Then, the researchers conducted a focus group involving 10 participants, including teachers, school administrators, and education specialists. Teachers' responses to the questionnaire and questions in the focus group were analyzed using a selective or highlighting approach. Each researcher analyzed the responses independently. The researchers then discussed the produced codes, categories, and subcategories in several meetings and exchanged their coding results. After there was consensus, every category and every subcategory were closely examined to look for any overlaps. The results of the analysis are presented in three topics: screening, providing assistance and monitoring. There are two themes, strengths and weaknesses, in each topic. The strengths of the screening topic include basic student assistance, systematic workflow, and teachers' expertise. The weaknesses of the screening topic include limited teacher numbers, teachers lacking expertise, and inappropriate screening timing. In the providing assistance topic, the sub-themes for strengths include student development, teachers' expertise in providing student assistance, and making teachers aware of students' actual problems. The sub-themes for weaknesses include teachers lacking tools for assisting students, low-quality tools for providing student assistance, and teachers lacking expertise. Lastly, in the monitoring topic, the strengths include teachers continuously receiving students' information, fostering collaboration in caring for and assisting students, and producing reliable system-generated progress reports. The weaknesses of monitoring include teachers lacking knowledge, lacking tools for monitoring students' progress, and the student progress monitoring system lacking quality.

**Keywords:** Elementary school; learning disabilities; screening; providing assistance; monitoring

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over four years – 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021, the number of students with learning disabilities in Thailand accounted for 84.93%, 85.81%, 86.92%, and 79.89%, respectively. Data show that students with learning disabilities make up the largest group among those with special educational needs, and there is a continuous upward trend in these numbers every year, except for the year 2021. The year 2021 was challenging for the Thai education system due to the COVID-19 pandemic, where the learning format was changed to online learning, causing stress and anxiety for both students and teachers. The impact of COVID-19 on education in Thailand has been significant, with challenges such as lack of access to internet facilities and inefficient technology hindering the learning process for students, especially in rural areas. The pandemic forced a shift towards online education, affecting the overall quality of the education system and highlighting the importance of factors like internet availability and accessibility to devices for students' learning experiences. However, the number of students with learning disabilities decreased during that year, suggesting that either the teachers lacked the tools to assess these disabilities or it was a temporary period when teachers were unable to evaluate students' learning disabilities (Wright et al., 2020).

Conversely, research indicates that students with learning disabilities experienced a significant reduction in the provision of special education and related services outlined in their individualized education programs (IEPs) during remote learning (Lee, 2022). In the year 2023, the number of students with learning disabilities increased to 88.07% of the total number of students with special needs (Special Education Bureau, 2023), the highest figure in several years. This increase may be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused learning loss among students, or it may be due to students receiving appropriate assessments after returning to regular learning formats. Additionally, Soria et al. (2020) point out that the number of students with learning disabilities increased after COVID-19. This rise is attributed to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on students with disabilities, leading to challenges such as financial hardships, food and housing insecurity, higher rates of mental health disorders, and lower feelings of belonging and support on campus.

Analyzing the present state of identifying, assisting, and overseeing elementary school students with learning disabilities in Thailand entails examining several crucial elements: screening protocols, support services, educator training, government regulations and provisions, parental engagement, evaluation and oversight, existing challenges and deficiencies, as well as exemplary practices and success stories. For instance, parental involvement could encompass assessing the parental role in the identification and assistance process. This includes understanding how parents are briefed on their child's learning requirements and the extent of their participation in devising tailored support strategies. She and Yao (2022) examine familial and educational attitudes towards children with special needs in China and Thailand. The authors found that familial attitudes vary based on cultural beliefs, and educational attitudes differ in teacher training and support in both countries. Thai people view children with special needs as indicative of past sins or good fortune, while Chinese parents may refuse diagnosis and then seek multiple opinions. Therefore, attitudes towards children with special needs vary between China and Thailand, with China allocating lower spending on education for children with special needs. In addition, educator training might delve into the instruction provided to teachers on identifying, accommodating, and aiding students with learning disabilities, gauging their preparedness to address the diverse needs of their students. Amornpaisarnloet and Arthur-Kelly (2024) investigate the competencies and concerns of Thai teachers in behavior management by comparing the perceptions and practices of general and special education teachers using a self-report questionnaire on teacher competencies and concerns. The authors found that there is no difference in competencies between general and special education teachers, both of whom lack confidence in dealing with student behavior problems.

When it comes to the tools used for screening learning disabilities in Thailand, there are relatively few compared to other countries. These countries offer a wide variety of tools for teachers and psychologists to choose from, such as the Stanford Achievement Test: Reading, the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test-Revised, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (K-TEA), and the Test of Written Spelling-2. In Thailand, there are tools like the "Wide Range Achievement Test - Thai Version: WRAT-Thai" developed by Pumreung Sayawaranon (1997) for screening students with Learning Disabilities (LD). The WRAT-Thai is specifically designed to assess academic skills within the context of the Thai language and educational system. It aims to provide educators and psychologists in Thailand with a reliable and culturally appropriate tool for evaluating basic academic skills in individuals. The WRAT-Thai typically includes subtests covering reading, spelling, and arithmetic. By utilizing the WRAT-Thai, educators and psychologists in Thailand can gather valuable information about an individual's academic strengths and weaknesses. This data can then inform instructional strategies, intervention plans, and educational accommodations tailored to the specific needs of each individual. Overall, the WRAT-Thai plays a crucial role in assessing and supporting individuals with learning disabilities and other educational needs within the Thai educational context. There is also the

"Kasetsart Basic Academic Skills Test (KBAST)," developed by Daranee Uthairatkit et al. (2012). However, the number of available screening tools for learning disabilities is limited. Furthermore, it is worth noting that many of the screening tools in Thailand have been in use for more than 10 years, even though the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA) (2013) suggests that standard tests may lose their quality if used for more than 20 years. In addition, there have been changes in the diagnostic criteria for learning disabilities. All the screening tools used in Thailand rely on diagnostic criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - IV - Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), even though current diagnostic criteria for learning disabilities follow the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - 5 (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These outdated key test components demonstrate the lack of up-to-date tools and criteria in the field of learning disability assessment in Thailand. Recently, the clinical psychology team at Suan Prung Hospital and Faculty has developed the Thai Standardized Achievement Test (TSAT) (Pontanya et al., 2020). The objective is to assess the learning disabilities of Thai children aged between 6 and 12 years old using a test developed based on the theories of cognitive and intellectual measurement, aligned with the core curriculum of the Ministry of Education. The standardized criteria can identify learning disabilities in reading, writing, and mathematics. This test will assist clinical psychologists in Thailand, both in the public health system and related private organizations, in identifying children with learning disabilities accurately through diagnoses by psychiatrists. However, the TSAT bears similarities to the WRAT-Thai test, meaning it can only be administered by clinical psychologists. Therefore, teachers in schools cannot utilize it; teachers must refer students to receive assessments from clinical psychologists. This referral process can be quite challenging and time-consuming if parents are uncooperative. Without parental cooperation, students may not undergo the necessary treatment. If students do enter the government's treatment process, it can take a long time to receive care. Alternatively, entering a treatment process that doesn't require long waiting times often comes with high treatment costs. Ultimately, these students may not receive appropriate assistance.

Additionally, the DSM-5 specifies that diagnosing a learning disability should be done after providing at least six months of help to the student. If the student continues to demonstrate restricted progress in learning, a diagnosis of a learning disability can be made (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, gathering evidence to show that a student has limitations in their learning development can be challenging. This is because most screening or general testing tools often compare a student's scores to those of their peers or use standard benchmarks. These tests are typically administered near the end of the academic year, and the results may not be available for teachers to use in planning and providing assistance to the students during the same academic year. If teachers can monitor the progress and development of students' learning, it can enable them to provide learning support in line with each student's potential. Early intervention is crucial to reduce the severity of learning disabilities. This is because teachers can plan and tailor their teaching to align with each student's capabilities. Correspondingly, Preedachaiyakul (2016), studied the efficacy of the screening program and management of children at risk of developmental or learning problems in 12 primary schools in Phuket province. He found that students who have received treatment have a 9.333 times higher chance of showing improvement in their condition and a 7.319 times higher chance of achieving better academic results compared to the group that did not receive treatment. This highlights the significant importance of professionals working with children who can identify at-risk groups and guide children through the care and assistance process. Previous studies have clearly shown that treatment and preservation of a child's learning abilities can help reduce various co-morbidities in the future, such as emotional issues, depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, legal issues, and substance abuse. Even though the screening and assistance are of high quality, without proper monitoring of the assistance outcomes or if the assistance is discontinued, students with learning disabilities may encounter various issues (Preedachaiyakul, 2016).

Preedachaiyakul, (2016) believes that there may be deficiencies in some aspects of screening, assistance, or monitoring of students with learning disabilities, which is why Thailand still has a relatively high number of students with learning disabilities. Therefore, in order to develop a strategy to support primary school students with learning difficulties in the future, it is imperative to examine the existing state of screening, assistance, and monitoring in this regard.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of this research is to study the current situation of screening, providing assistance, and monitoring students with learning disabilities. The researchers developed and conducted a survey that consisted of three sections: demographic questions, twelve open-ended questions, and ten satisfaction questions, in order to seek information to address the research purpose. The survey was initially sent by post but the response rate was low so, the researchers developed an online version of the survey to solicit a greater

response rate. Finally, the researchers received 70 completed questionnaires back. Then, the researchers conducted a focus group involving 10 participants, including teachers, school administrators, and education specialists. A focus group is an unstructured interview process where participants are asked about their thoughts, experiences, and observations on specific topics. The discussion will revolve around the following issues: screening, providing assistance, and monitoring students with learning disabilities.

### 3. PARTICIPANTS

Ethical approval was granted by Kasetsart University that the researchers are affiliated with. Then the survey was distributed to the school principals of primary schools in Bangkok. This resulted in a total of 70 completed surveys.

**Table 1:** Participant demographics

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Current position		
Thai Language teacher	45	64.28
Special education teacher	11	15.72
School counselor	6	8.57
School administrator	2	2.86
Other: English teacher, Science teacher	6	8.57
Grade taught		
First grade	24	34.28
Second grade	22	31.44
Third grade	17	24.28
Other: School administrator	7	10.00
Affiliation		
Bangkok Metropolitan Administration	31	44.28
Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC)	19	27.14
Ministry of the Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation	11	15.72
Office of the Private Education Commission	9	12.86
Experience teaching students with learning disabilities in the past 3 years		
Yes	48	68.57
No	18	25.71
Not sure	4	5.72
Highest academic qualification		
Bachelor's degree	38	54.28
Master's degree	30	42.85
Doctoral degree	2	2.87
Attend training related to screening for students with disabilities		
No	36	51.43
Yes	34	48.57

As can be seen in Table 1, most participants are affiliated with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (44.28 percent) and teach Thai (64.28 percent) in the first grade (34.28 percent). 54.28 percent of participants had a bachelor's degree. Even though the majority of participants have experience teaching students with learning disabilities over the past three years (68.57 percent), they have never attended training related to screening for students with disabilities (51.43 percent).

### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

This research applies a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to study existential ontology by gaining an understanding of the personal experience individuals undergo. The findings obtained are those that have undergone the researchers' process of interpretation. The researchers analyzed data using the selective or highlighting approach to identify the meaningful aspects of the narrative by reading and scrutinizing the data in each part. The researchers analyzed the text word by word, carefully examined the collected data, and formulated questions to establish units of meaning (themes) (Junprasert, 2022). In accordance with Graneheim and Lundman (2004) a coding unit consists of words, sentences or paragraphs. After analyzing every item from the survey and the focus group independently, the researchers identified the most important subcategories, which were then combined into comprehensive categories (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Each of the researchers examined the answers independently. Subsequently, the researchers exchanged the coding results

and held multiple meetings to discuss the derived codes, categories, and subcategories. Once agreement was met, all categories and sub-categories were carefully compared for any overlaps.

## 5. RESULTS

Results are presented as follows: screening, providing assistance, and monitoring.

### 5.1 Screening

There are two themes in the screening topic: strengths and weaknesses. The sub-themes for strengths include basic student assistance, systematic workflow, and teachers' expertise. The sub-themes for weaknesses include limited teacher numbers, teachers lacking expertise, and inappropriate screening timing. Participants mostly have varying time intervals and screening frequencies. The tools used also vary; some schools rely on observation alone, while others employ screening methods that involve students in activities or use standardized tests. Teachers primarily play a central role in the screening process. The advantages participants find in screening include providing initial assistance to students and having a systematic approach to screening.

The screening process can assist students in appropriate educational management. (participant no. 7)

Areas that need improvement include insufficient and unqualified experts in special education or screening. Most participants suggest more specialized agencies, such as psychologists and psychiatrists, should be involved in the screening process. Participants also recommend improving the quality of the screening process, making it user-friendly, less time-consuming, and more standardized. The following are actual responses from participants:

Some parents refuse to take their children to the hospital, even after receiving referral letters, or some students do not receive continuous treatment, which deprives them of full educational assistance. (participant no. 48)

The problem is that there are few personnel capable of screening. (participant no.23)

While schools may have many special education teachers, they cannot conduct initial screenings because some of them have not yet been licensed for screening. (participant no. 29)

These responses indicate varying perspectives and issues related to the screening process for students with learning disabilities.

### 5.2 Providing assistance

In the providing assistance topic, there are two themes: strengths and weaknesses. The sub-themes for strengths include student development, teachers' expertise in providing student assistance, and making teachers aware of students' actual problems. The sub-themes for weaknesses include teachers lacking tools for assisting students, low-quality tools for providing student assistance, and teachers lacking expertise. Additional details are as follows. Most schools have processes for developing Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students with learning disabilities and adjusting their assessment criteria, such as reducing the content they need to study, decreasing the amount of assignments, and adapting grading to suit their needs. Additionally, teachers provide supplementary instruction during students' free periods, such as lunch breaks or after school. The screening process aligns with the support process, as teachers use screening results to plan assistance systematically, ensuring that teaching and support are tailored to each student's specific needs.

Develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students with learning disabilities and adjust IEP at least once per semester to analyze and tailor it to each student. (participant no. 10)

However, teachers have identified some weaknesses in the assistance process, including the lack of expertise among staff and a lack of cooperation from parents. To address these issues, teachers propose improvements such as increasing the number of specialized teachers, providing training for teachers and parents, and increasing financial support for student care and assistance.

Increase the budget to support teacher training and ensure teachers have up-to-date knowledge. (participant no. 2)

The school provides assistance to students by offering supplementary classrooms for additional learning after school hours. (participant no. 5)

There are teachers with expertise in managing learning for students with learning disabilities in particular. (participant no. 34)

These suggestions aim to enhance the overall support and assistance provided to students with learning disabilities.

### 5.3 Monitoring

In the monitoring topic, there are two themes: strengths and weaknesses. The sub-themes for strengths include teachers continuously receiving students' information, fostering collaboration in caring for and assisting students, and producing reliable system-generated progress reports. The sub-themes for weaknesses include teachers lacking knowledge and tools for monitoring students' progress, and the student progress monitoring system lacking quality. Additional details are as follows. Teachers monitor the progress of students with learning disabilities by assessing students' academic performance and gathering feedback from the class teacher, subject teachers, and parents. The frequency of monitoring varies depending on the interventions provided, such as every semester, every month, or every week. Continuous progress monitoring allows teachers to collect information on each student's development, which can be used to adjust and enhance their educational plans. Teachers also use this data to generate reports for relevant parties. However, teachers believe that there is room for improvement in the monitoring process. They suggest the development of both personnel and tools used for student tracking and promoting collaboration among all relevant stakeholders. Below are example responses from participants:

Assess reading and writing skills to determine if they have improved or remained the same. (participant no. 11)

Enhance and systematize the monitoring process, emphasizing parents to invest more time in it. (participant no. 21)

There are reports on learning outcomes for further transmission to the next class and for further education. (participant no. 49)

There is ongoing progress monitoring. (participant no. 8)

Satisfaction results related to the screening process, assistance and follow-up of the 70 respondents are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Satisfaction results

Statements	Satisfaction level							
	The most		A lot		Little		Least	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Screening process</b>								
Expertise of screening personnel	11	15.71	38	54.29	20	28.57	1	1.43
Tools used for screening	10	14.28	37	52.86	21	30.00	2	2.86
Cooperation of parents, students, or teachers	7	10.00	37	52.86	22	31.43	4	5.71
Screening time (e.g., end of the academic year)	6	8.57	41	58.57	21	30.00	2	2.86
Duration of screening	8	11.43	41	58.57	20	28.57	1	1.43
<b>Providing assistance</b>								
Intervention methods	11	15.71	48	68.58	10	14.28	1	1.43
Assistance personnel	10	14.28	50	71.43	9	12.86	1	1.43
Budget	4	5.71	36	51.43	26	37.15	4	5.71
<b>Monitoring</b>								
Progress tracking	8	11.43	48	68.58	13	18.56	1	1.43
Following up the interventions	8	11.43	50	71.43	11	15.71	1	1.43

In the screening process, participants expressed the highest level of satisfaction with the expertise of screening personnel (15.71%), followed by the tools used for screening (14.28%), and the duration of screening (11.43%). In terms of providing assistance, the highest level of satisfaction was reported with intervention methods (15.71%), followed by the assistance personnel (14.28%), and the budget (5.71%). Regarding monitoring, participants reported equally high satisfaction levels with progress tracking and following up on the interventions.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Numerous variables influence the effectiveness of school screenings for students with learning disabilities. These variables pertain to the personnel involved. Those responsible for screening must have specialized knowledge in assessment and a deep understanding of the screening process. However, in practical terms, some personnel capable of screening have limitations. Several schools lack special education teachers or psychologists, and some teachers do not have a sufficient level of expertise in the screening process. Additionally, some individuals may not possess the required credentials to perform screenings. Certainly, teachers play a crucial role in screening students for learning disabilities, as they are often the first to observe signs of academic or behavioural difficulties in the classroom. Therefore, teachers play a vital role in screening students for learning disabilities by observing, documenting, assessing, and supporting students' academic and behavioural needs. For example, teachers can observe students' academic performance, behaviour, and social interactions in the classroom. Teachers take note of any persistent difficulties or patterns of behaviour that may indicate a learning disability. These include struggles with reading, writing, mathematics, attention, organization, memory, or social skills.

In addition to this, teachers can collect various types of data to inform the screening process., which, may include academic assessments, standardized test scores, classroom observations, work samples, anecdotal records, and input from parents or other school staff. Gathering comprehensive data allows teachers to identify students who may need further assessment for learning disabilities. Their proactive approach helps identify students who may require additional support or intervention early on, leading to improved outcomes and success in school. It is advisable to enhance the expertise of existing personnel by providing them with more knowledge and guidance. This should include basic education on special education to ensure that future educators have a fundamental understanding of special education. In terms of tools, it is essential that the tools used meet standardized requirements. It has been found that the screening tools have limited indicators and cannot provide results based on individual grade levels. They can only provide a general overview for elementary education. Therefore, screening tools should be developed to meet standardized scoring criteria for Thai students.

Regarding the use of screening tools, the research found that different schools use various screening tools. For example, some schools use reading and writing screening tools, while others use screening tools provided by the Thai Language Institute, the Office of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards, and the Office of the Basic Education Commission under the Ministry of Education. In terms of the timing of screening activities, it is recommended to allow students time to adjust to their new classrooms before conducting screening. Also, there is a need to extend the screening timeframe to twice a year, specifically at the end of each semester. This allows students to adapt to their new classes, and screening becomes a regular part of the process. The timing of screening students for learning disabilities is crucial for early identification and intervention, which can significantly impact academic outcomes and overall well-being. Screening can occur at various stages of a student's educational journey, including preschool, elementary school, middle school, and high school levels, as well as ongoing monitoring, re-evaluation, and transition points. Overall, early and ongoing screening for learning disabilities is essential for identifying students who may require additional support and intervention. By identifying learning difficulties early and providing appropriate accommodations and interventions, educators can assist students with learning disabilities to reach their full potential academically and socially.

After the screening process, teachers can assist students by creating Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to provide personalized help based on each student's potential. It is also recommended to analyze and adjust the learning plans at least once per semester. Individual Education Programs (IEPs) are crucial for students with learning disabilities, as they serve as the cornerstone for designing tailored teaching and learning approaches. Special education teachers face competency challenges in effectively implementing IEPs for students with learning disabilities, particularly in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitude. This emphasizes the need for further comprehensive studies involving all stakeholders to enhance the process. Furthermore, teachers lack motivation to implement IEPs for students with learning disabilities (Wong & Rashid, 2022). In the inclusive classroom, it is advisable to reduce assessment criteria and provide supplementary academic instruction for students with learning disabilities from specialized experts or teachers who have direct education experience. By reducing assessment criteria and offering supplementary pedagogical instruction, teachers can support the academic growth and success of students with learning disabilities, ensuring they have access to the general curriculum and opportunities to demonstrate their learning. Effective instruction is key for students with learning disabilities. In terms of providing assistance in school, it should be a systematic process. This means that schools should have a post-screening support system, and the assistance provided should aim to address students' specific needs and goals. The post-screening support system may include the

Individualized Education Program (IEP), specialized instruction, assistive technologies, additional support services, progress monitoring and adjustments, and family involvement and support. Individualized learning plans should be developed to align with students' requirements or issues. However, personnel with expertise in managing the learning of students with special needs must possess direct experience and knowledge. The practical implementation in schools can face challenges due to insufficient personnel. In Thailand, there are provincial education centres in various provinces that specialize in supporting and assisting children with special needs. These centres have been continually developing and adapting their assistance methods to be more effective and appropriate. In early 2023, there was a meeting between the Deputy Secretary-General of the Basic Education Commission and the directors of the Office of Special Education Administration in various provinces. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the development and screening methods and how to support and assist students, emphasizing ongoing improvement (Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2023).

The monitoring of the intervention outcomes provides access to all students with learning disabilities who have planned assistance. However, it should be monitored monthly or on a regular basis in order to be able to analyse the students' progress and it should have a systematic compilation of data. Today's general progress tracing does not have a person directly responsible but a class teacher involved in the care. Having a specialist directly responsible will make it possible to perform better, develop comprehensive, modern tools to facilitate operations, and develop a more modelled progression tracking system by increasing the involvement of parents. For the teachers, monitoring and supporting students with learning disabilities is not the sole responsibility of the school, but it also involves collaborating with the medical staff, and providing educational assistance, social and family assistance, as well as legal knowledge and rights to maintain and educate students to achieve their full potential (Rajanukul Institute, 2014).

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