Original Research

Teaching Across Many Thailands: Regional Perspectives on Special Education Practice

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Submitted: 3 July 2026 Revised: 26 September 2026 Accepted: 13 October 2026 Published: 13 November 2026

Abstract

Thailand has a history of prioritizing education for children with disabilities. Although research has revealed challenges generally encountered by Thai special educators, the availability of many opportunities and services is tied to geography and associated differences in language, cultural practices, and economic conditions. Yet accounts of these conditions across sites situated in different parts of the country are limited. This exploratory, multi-site qualitative study examines barriers to service provision through interviews with special educators (n = 10) at sites located across Thailand's four primary regions. Interviews were thematically analyzed. Findings reveal contextual variation across sites, including resource scarcity and stigma, strong staffing and individualized education program (IEP) use coupled with restricted spending rules, and limited capacity for students with more intensive needs. Although the sample cannot characterize wider regional dynamics, these results highlight how sociocultural context and material conditions shape practice and suggest that realizing the promise of Whole Schooling may depend on factors beyond the control of individual schools. Depending on the context, tailored professional development and policy changes may be necessary to support school-level change.

Keywords: Thailand; special education; disability; qualitative research

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Southeast Asia's fourth largest country, Thailand has a population of approximately 70 million (Fry, 2018; United Nations, 2024). Due to its central location, Thailand is exceptionally diverse, with over 70 languages, various religious groups (e.g., Buddhists, Muslims), and ongoing immigration from neighboring Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and Myanmar (Premsrirat & Person, 2018; Ra-ngubtook & Bhongsatiern, 2024). Cleavages between the Buddhist, native Thai-speaking majority and other cultures are reinforced by disparities in socioeconomic status (SES; Premsrirat & Person, 2018). Additionally, the availability of many opportunities and services, including special education, is tied to geography, with implications for the supports available to students with disabilities.

Geographic differences are often examined through Thailand's administrative and cultural regional divisions. Thailand is composed of 77 provinces—including the capital, Bangkok—which scholars have traditionally grouped into regions based on demographic, cultural, linguistic, and economic factors (e.g., Fry et al., 2018). Although fine-grained analyses of internal dynamics are associated with a greater number of subdivisions (e.g., Tipayalai, 2020), scholarship commonly focuses on four regions: the North, Northeast, Central, and South (Fry et al., 2018; Tipayalai, 2020). Fry et al. (2018) linked educational disparities across regions to economic performance per capita, the distance from Bangkok, and other factors that reflect broader patterns in educational quality that vary across the four regions.

Indices of educational quality suggest small schools in remote border areas across regions have the lowest levels of performance (Fry et al., 2018). The *Northern region* is among the most ethnically and linguistically diverse areas in the country. Few northern provinces rank at either the highest or lowest levels of education quality. The *Northeast* has the largest portion of Thailand's population and is the country's most disadvantaged region, with the lowest overall educational

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quality. Home to Thailand's capital, the *Central region* encompasses rich farmland, industrial and financial infrastructure, multiple universities, and the country's highest education quality. The *Southern region* houses a large Muslim minority who speak a regional Thai dialect or variations of languages spoken in Malaysia. A growing tourist hub, the Southern region is associated with high-quality education in urban tourist areas and lower-quality education along the border.

Resource disparities have posed persistent challenges to improving Thailand's education system, contributing to uneven access to special education services. Although such disparities are often characterized in terms of urban or rural areas, this distinction oversimplifies important factors (e.g., violence, cultural resources) that vary across specific locations (Miller et al., 2019). Regions likewise encompass a variety of characteristics such as urbanicity, socioeconomic conditions, language, and access to educational resources. Regional profiles are nonetheless informative as a broad contextual marker of factors relevant to—if not determinative of—educational practices.

Special Education in Thailand

Whole Schooling conceives of inclusion as an undertaking that involves creating meaningful and communal participation for all students (Peterson & Hittie, 2025). However, the inclusion of diverse groups—particularly those with disabilities—remains a challenge in many countries (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). Thailand's commitment to educating all students, including those with disabilities, is notable among emerging economies (Fry, 2018; Ra-ngubtook & Bhongsatiern, 2024). The Thailand National Education Act of 1999 mandated that every school must include students with disabilities, regardless of severity (National Education Act B.E. 2542, 1999). In 2008, Thailand passed the Education for Persons with Disabilities Act, which introduced individualized education programs (IEPs) to school systems and mandated their implementation (Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013). Schools cannot deny access to general education for children with disabilities, and all students must have opportunities to participate in school (Kantavong & Kiettikunwong, 2020). The Thai special education system nominally acknowledges many of the same categories enshrined in U.S. law (e.g., learning disabilities [LD]; Vandeweyer et al., 2020). Funds for special education services are allocated by the government on an annual basis (Ra-ngubtook & Bhongsatiern, 2024).

Despite legislative reforms, Thailand—like many emerging economies—has struggled to administer effective inclusive education for children with disabilities (Kantavong & Kiettikunwong, 2020). Thailand lacks the infrastructure to enforce special education laws and has encountered persistent barriers in providing educational access for the poorest families (e.g., Kosuwan et al., 2014; Vandeweyer et al., 2020). Public schools often do not have the personnel needed to provide inclusive or self-contained services (Kosuwan et al., 2014). Persistent shortages of credentialed special educators mean that general education teachers—and teachers trained in unrelated subjects—are frequently assigned to provide special education services, often without specialized preparation. In addition to inclusive schools, special education services are delivered in special schools or welfare schools for children in poverty (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, 2018). Many children with disabilities continue to receive services at home, in institutions, or through a constellation of public or private entities (Kantavong & Kiettikunwong, 2020; Ra-ngubtook & Bhongsatiern, 2024). Placement is strongly influenced by families' socioeconomic status, educational background, and—perhaps most importantly—place of residence; Thailand has pronounced resource disparities based on region, with many amenities available only in urban areas (Fry et al., 2018; Vandeweyer et al., 2020).

Challenges to effective special education extend beyond training and resource disparities observed throughout Thailand's education system (e.g., Lathapipat, 2018; Mounier & Tangchuang, 2018; Ra-ngubtook & Bhongsatiern, 2024). Barriers include prevailing uncertainty about how to provide services, beliefs about the capabilities of people with disabilities, and policies that restrict access based on academic aptitude (Kosuwan et al., 2014). School staff require more support and training to effectively serve students with disabilities (Kantavong & Kiettikunwong, 2020; Locharoenrat, 2019). Current work, though limited, suggests that many educators are reluctant to work with children with disabilities or do not possess the skills to provide adequate services (Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2018).

Perspectives of Educators Providing Disability Services in Thailand

The literature concerning special education in Thailand has largely examined the perspectives of general educators and school administrators, using interviews (e.g., Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2025), surveys (e.g., Martinez & Fabella, 2023), and questionnaires (e.g., Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2022). These studies highlight both progress and persistent challenges

in implementing inclusive education, primarily in early childhood and elementary settings (e.g., Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2025; Kantavong & Kiettikunwong, 2020). Many studies included respondents from across Thailand (e.g., Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2022), often from unspecified regions (e.g., Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2018; Martinez & Fabella, 2023), while others were limited to specific areas (e.g., Phetchabun Province, Dhedchawanagon et al., 2024; Khon Kaen Province, Kantavong & Kiettikunwong, 2020; Bangkok, Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2025). Across these varied samples, several consistent challenges have been reported.

Notwithstanding reports of more positive experiences and adequate support for educators among smaller samples (Martinez & Fabella, 2023), many studies (e.g., Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2025; Kantavong & Kiettikunwong, 2020) found that teachers received limited support from school administrators, had limited planning time, and struggled to meet the needs of students. Teachers who participated in focus groups conducted by Kantavong and Kiettikunwong (2020) identified challenges related to behavior management and struggled to collaborate with families. Although some issues were amenable to specialized municipal parent-teacher training initiatives, teachers reported poor rapport with the training team, a limited budget, inappropriate training materials (i.e., some presented in a foreign language), and low acceptance of disabilities among participating parents as impediments to inclusion. Such views are not unique to parents; training has also sought to transition educators from traditional views of disability as a pitiable consequence of ". . . something bad in your previous life . . ." toward greater acceptance (Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2018, p. 114).

Klibthong and Agbenyega's (2022) survey of 344 early childhood teachers in inclusive kindergartens across Thailand identified multiple persistent challenges. Educators cited staff shortages, inadequate training, time constraints, and insufficient resources as barriers. Notably, such concerns differed significantly by region. These results, which echo scholarship concerning Thailand's broader education system (e.g., Fry et al., 2018), underscore the importance of the sociocultural and material context in which special education occurs.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which conceptualizes human actions as part of a culturally situated system composed of interrelated elements including the community, rules, and division of labor (Engeström, 2001; Nussbaumer, 2012). CHAT emphasizes the role of the broader sociocultural context, including regional histories, norms, and material conditions, in shaping educational practice. Within an activity system, a subject (e.g., the special educator) works toward an object (e.g., effective services for students with disabilities) through mediating artifacts (e.g., available instructional resources), under a set of rules (e.g., education policies and their administration), within a community (e.g., families and provincial special education partners), and according to a division of labor (e.g., distribution of students and subject assignments among teachers). CHAT holds that practice is shaped not by any single element but by the relationships and tensions among them, such that specific barriers such as limited instructional support, inappropriate policies, or inequitable distributions of labor reverberate through the system and impede the object, or goal, of special education.

The CHAT framework allows us to examine how micro-level practices and beliefs within schools interact with broader geographical and sociocultural contexts. It guides our interpretation of educators' experiences, which are nested within contexts in which access to resources, divisions of labor, and community relationships may be influenced by Thailand's prominent regional conditions (Fry et al., 2018). CHAT also facilitates the identification of barriers to and opportunities for the pursuit of Whole Schooling, as activity systems encompass elements central to its principles (e.g., community partnerships). Examining how various contextual layers interact across specific settings is therefore relevant to understanding the circumstances under which the aims of Whole Schooling can be realized.

Purpose

Much attention has been paid to the uneven development of disability services in early childhood education and elementary education in Thailand (e.g., Kantavong & Kiettikunwong, 2020). However, the influence of broader geographic and sociocultural conditions on special education requires further exploration. Beyond the Thai context, this work is consistent with the growing interest in the interaction between nominally effective practices and individual linguistic, cultural, and ethnic factors that may impede their administration (Thorius et al., 2024; West et al., 2016). These factors correspond with several Principles of Whole Schooling (Peterson, 2025), such as the inclusion of diverse learners (Principle 3), adequate

supports for both students and educators (Principle 5), and the importance of school partnerships with families and communities (Principle 6)—each of which motivates our examination of the Thai context. As greater attention to the variation in disability services is needed, this exploratory, multi-site qualitative study focuses on perspectives of special educators at sites situated across Thailand's four regions. Two questions guided the study: (1) What challenges do educators at participating sites encounter when serving students with disabilities? and (2) How do educators across participating sites describe variation in resources and other conditions necessary for realizing the principles of Whole Schooling?

Methods

Participants

All procedures received approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Eligible individuals included adults employed as educators, administrators, or support staff who served students with disabilities in Thailand. Initial participants, purposefully selected from each of Thailand's four principal regions, were recruited from the first author's existing professional networks. These participants identified additional individuals who met criteria for inclusion (i.e., snowball recruitment; Browne, 2005). Thirteen educators serving students with disabilities in K-13 school settings throughout Thailand were identified through social connections and contacted via email. Ten educators from nine separate schools ultimately consented to interviews. Three educators who initially agreed to participate declined due to lack of time and concerns regarding student confidentiality.

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the sample. Between 20% and 30% of participants were recruited from each region. Most participants (80%) were women with an average age of 33 years (range = 24–51; *SD* = 9.72). On average, participants reported having 3.7 years of experience as special educators (range = 0.5–10; *SD* = 3.38). The majority (70%) taught elementary-level courses. All participants worked in public schools and reported serving students with high-incidence disabilities (e.g., LD); 30% indicated they also taught students with intellectual and other low-incidence disabilities. Regardless, 80% indicated at least some of their teaching occurred in self-contained classrooms. One participant reported performing administrative responsibilities in addition to their role as an educator. Thirty percent of participants had graduate degrees; 70% did not have a degree in special education.

Sample size was considered in terms of information power (Malterud et al., 2016, 2021), which conceptualizes the appropriate number of participants in terms of (a) the specificity of research objectives, (b) experiential or status homogeneity of participants, (c) the theoretical grounding of the study, (d) the quality of dialogue engendered by the interview process, and (e) the intended breadth of the analysis. The scope of the analysis required more participants than necessary for an intensive analysis of a single setting. However, other factors—such as the specificity of our focus on sites across Thailand's four regions, interest in a distinct population (i.e., special educators), adherence to an established theoretical framework, and the density of our interaction with participants—suggest that the study supports adequate information power despite the modest sample (Roberts et al., 2026).

Procedures

Potential participants were contacted prior to the first author's arrival in Thailand in May of 2024. Consent materials were distributed in advance of in-person meetings. Questions regarding the study were addressed electronically and immediately prior to obtaining in-person consent. The study concluded in August 2024. Where permitted, classroom instruction was observed to provide additional context. Four participants consented to observations, which were informally recorded in fieldnotes and focused on interactions, instructional strategies, and available resources to assist in contextualizing interview responses. Fieldnotes were not formally coded. Reported findings do not include observation data. All interviews and observations were conducted in Thai by the first author at places and times convenient for participants.

Individual interviews lasting between 2 and 3 hours consisted of at least 25 open-ended questions informed by prior research (e.g., Kantavong & Kiettikunwong, 2020; Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2022) and the first author's experience as an educator and native of Thailand. Questions pertained to participant background, training, resources, caseloads, and professional challenges (e.g., *What is the greatest challenge you face in terms of providing services to children with disabilities? Do you feel you receive adequate training?*). Follow-up questions were asked, as needed, for clarity. All responses were audio-recorded. The study involved over 50 hours of direct contact with participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of participating educators.

Participant	Age	Gender	Education	Grade	Role	Setting	Yrs Exp (Total/SPED)	Region
Kaew[1]	33	F	BA Ed (Thai)	1–6	HID/TLA	SC/GenEd	4/4	N
Ton	24	M	BA Ed (Chemistry)	2–7	HID/HET	SC	0.5/0.5	N
Tong[1]	50	F	BA in Early Childhood Ed	K–6	LID/HID	SC/GenEd	12/9	N
Kampang	32	F	BA in English; TC	1–6	HID/LID/ELA	SC/GenEd	7/2	NE
Daow[1]	26	F	BA Administration	K–6	Adm/HID/GenEd	GenEd	1/0.5	NE
Suda	25	F	BA Ed (Thai)	6–12	HID/TLA	GenEd	2.5/2.5	S
Suchard	29	M	BA (Math)	6–7	HID/Math	SC/GenEd	7/0.5	S
Nush[2]	28	F	BA in SPED MA in Educational Management	2	HID	SC/GenEd	4/4	C
Noina[2]	32	F	B.Ed. in SPED MA in Educational Management	1	HID	SC/GenEd	7/4	C
Karn[1]	51	F	MA in SPED BA in English; TC	7–9	HID/LID	SC/GenEd	13/10	C

Note. Yrs Exp, years of experience; N, Northern Thailand; C, Central Thailand; NE, Northeastern Thailand; S, Southern Thailand; Adm, administration; TLA, Thai Language Arts; ELA, English Language Arts; HET, Home Economics and Technology; SC, self-contained classroom; LID, low-incidence disabilities; HID, high-incidence disabilities; GenEd, general education; SPED, special education; TC, teaching certification program. [1]Indicates participants whose schools permitted observations; [2]Indicates participants worked at the same school.

Data Analysis

Data primarily consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted in Thai and translated into English by the first author. Interviews were examined using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun et al., 2022; Byrne, 2022), a flexible process in which the first author serves as the chief analytic resource rather than codebooks or multiple authors. Themes were actively generated from the data by the first author, a native Thai and Lao speaker, which is consistent with RTA's reliance on the linguistically and culturally situated subjectivity of the primary analyst.

Analysis proceeded through iterative, repeated engagement with the interview data (Byrne, 2022). This ensured the first author's familiarity with the dataset and facilitated the construction of codes representing notable features of the participants' accounts. Codes were generated across the entire dataset rather than separately by site and subsequently organized into provisional themes, which were reviewed in relation to codes and the wider dataset. Themes were then refined to capture patterns across the data. For example, codes representing parental attitudes toward disability and community support were considered in the development of the broader theme of parent and community cooperation. Analytic decisions were recorded to document the development of four finalized themes: (1) parent and community cooperation, (2) funding and resources, (3) educator preparedness, and (4) perspectives on inclusion and instruction. Reporting entailed translating Thai quotations into English with emphasis on conceptual, rather than literal, equivalence (Herdman et al., 1997). When wording was ambiguous, the first author re-checked the Thai audio and noted translation choices to preserve intended meaning.

We adopted a regional presentation of themes because geographic distribution influenced our sampling logic and region provides a general indication of external factors that are relevant to Whole Schooling. As in other retrospective applications of CHAT (e.g., Zhang et al., 2026), themes were generated inductively and the framework was applied interpretively rather than as a priori codes. Following their development, we examined each theme in relation to the activity system (e.g., mediating artifacts, rules, community) to characterize how conditions differed across sites.

We attended to trustworthiness using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility, or the fit between our participants' views and their representation within this manuscript, is addressed by our lengthy engagement with the participants. Transferability, or the extent to which consumers can generalize results to their own settings, is supported by the detailed descriptions of settings and participants (Table 1) and translated quotations. Dependability and confirmability are supported by analytic notes documenting the path from initial codes to

final themes, and by the positionality statement.

Author Positionality

The first author is a native speaker of Thai and Lao from Northern Thailand. Prior to pursuing graduate degrees in special education in the U.S., she earned credentials in English translation in Bangkok. She shared common cultural characteristics with many participants, which aided in the development of interview questions. However, her status as a researcher and educated professional may have influenced her interactions. She was primarily responsible for all aspects of the study, including recruitment, data collection, translation, and analysis. The second author is a faculty member in special education in the midwestern U.S. who speaks English exclusively. He assisted with study design and manuscript preparation. The two authors worked together throughout the research process to ensure the study reflected their combined expertise and was appropriate for the context.

Results

Across ten interviews, we generated four themes: parent and community cooperation, funding and resources, educator preparedness, and perspectives on inclusion and instruction. Results are presented by region to preserve site-level contrasts and connect participant accounts to their context. Findings reflect the experiences of participants embedded in specific sites rather than characteristics of the regions themselves.

Parent and Community Cooperation

Family and community engagement varied across sites and was shaped by views of disability and family circumstances.

North

Participants at Northern sites described stigma and community resistance as primary obstacles to collaboration. Tong (F, 50), a teacher with 9 years as a special educator, described how the reluctance of some parents to accept a diagnosis dampened attendance and inhibited instruction: "Many parents cannot accept the fact that their child has special needs because of social pressure and deny the services." Kaew (F, 33) also noted the lack of parental collaboration. In addition to the stigma associated with disability, she suggested the lack of education regarding disabilities and the personal struggles of families—many of which were led by single mothers tasked with caring for older family members—also prevented collaboration. Kaew considered this, combined with the preference for families of children with more salient disabilities (e.g., intellectual disabilities [ID]) to keep their children from attending school, to be the biggest challenge related to providing special education services.

Ton (M, 24)—a novice special educator working in a remote mountain village—indicated that parents were far more willing to collaborate, with some even willing to donate food or other items to the school. In spite of this kindness, Ton found that enlisting the parents in instructional activities was challenging because 100% of the families with which he worked were Hmong and had different ways of life, culture, and language. While older children were able to speak Thai, Ton did not speak Hmong and found it difficult to communicate directly with families.

Northeast

Kampang (F, 32), who described her transition from teaching secondary English to elementary special education as "daunting," indicated that support from parents was critical to helping her meet the mandates described in Thai special education law. Kampang also shared that most guardians of the students were their grandparents, as many parents leave the area to seek work in the cities: "Many of our students live with grandparents, and most of the time, they lack an understanding of special education services and official disability status." Families often fear a permanent disability label will prevent their children from getting a 'decent job,' resulting in the refusal of special education services or lack of effective cooperation between home and school.

South

Suchard (M, 29), a math teacher with 7 years of experience who had recently been appointed to the role of special educator, reported that parents' varying perspectives regarding the value of education influenced cooperation:

> There is a greater emphasis on practical working skills rather than formal education. Many parents in these areas show little interest in their children's schooling . . . making it difficult to collaborate and support students with disabilities in reaching their full potential.

Suchard attributed the limited enthusiasm for education to the parents' belief that their children would not progress beyond high school. Families reportedly prioritized functional skills, such as fishing, instead.

Central

Karn (F, 51), Noina (F, 32), and Nush (F, 28)—experienced educators with at least 4 years of experience as special educators—noted that parents of students with physical disabilities tended to be very involved and advocate for their children. Karn specifically described a high degree of involvement:

> I have witnessed many parents volunteering to support special needs students . . . Some parents volunteered as paraeducators. One parent even rented a wheelchair-accessible bus for the school so that our students who use wheelchairs could participate in field trips and community activities.

However, the teachers also reported that parents sometimes refused services due to social embarrassment. Nush described parents who claimed their busy schedules made it challenging to work with their children at home and who failed to attend IEP meetings. The lack of parental advocacy and assistance at home impeded student progress and frequently required re-teaching. Nush described this as a cycle of stagnation: "It's like we start over and over again every day."

Funding and Resources

Two distinct resource issues were evident across sites: scarcity and institutionally imposed constraints on spending.

North

Participants at Northern sites consistently described shortages in material resources. Kaew explained that only 40% of students with IEPs were eligible for government support. This forced schools to stretch limited resources and, combined with variations in funding across provinces and opaque allocation criteria, exacerbated inequalities. Rather than teaching in a classroom, Ton provided services in spaces such as the lunch area or storage rooms. Without available school technology, Ton used his personal computer to develop and deliver lessons. Tong likewise reported a lack of supplies. Describing recent budget cuts, Tong explained: "We don't have enough money coming in. I want to buy materials for my classroom . . . but teachers barely make enough to live." Despite the lack of resources, all three Northern participants expressed clear priorities for improving the learning environment (e.g., art supplies, adaptive physical education equipment).

Northeast

At Northeastern sites, access to institutional support partly offset differences in material resources. Kampang, who taught in an urban setting, reported that the school principal compensated for families' lack of transportation resources by arranging for hospital visits and other services. She acknowledged that materials were somewhat scarce, but suggested that support from the local hospital and the province's special education center made the situation manageable: "It's not much, but we have what we need for our students to meet their goals." Kampang expressed gratitude for online forums where teachers could consult with doctors and other professionals. In contrast, Daow (F, 26) reported minimal funds and institutional support at her rural school. She further noted that schools had to submit IEPs to obtain government funding but that she had not received adequate training in this process: "To be honest with you, I am not sure I fully understand what an IEP is, let alone how to create one and submit it to the government."

South

Although resource availability was reportedly dependent on school size, location, and caseload, neither Southern participant identified the absence of resources as a major concern. Suda (F, 25)—whose entire special education caseload consisted of a single student with LD—was not worried about the resources available at her rural school. Suchard, who served large groups of students with LD at an urban school, likewise reported no concerns over funding. However, he did think his students would benefit from access to personal computers.

Central

Participants at Central sites reported sufficient levels of funding and material support. Nush and Karn described access to high-quality resources and technology supported by donations from private or governmental organizations. Noina noted that funding had never been a barrier. However, she did identify restrictions on how funds could be used: "The real problem is that we are restricted in how we can use these funds because the government dictates what we are allowed to purchase."

Educator Preparedness

Preparedness reflected participants' pathway into special education, their formal training, and the specific demands of their roles.

North

All three Northern participants reported receiving minimal formal preparation in special education. Kaew, who served in her position for four years without a special education degree, noted that her school lacked trained personnel. Her only training consisted of half-day lectures concerning the IEP process and special education technology. She felt additional opportunities for modeling and hands-on instruction would greatly improve her practice. Although she had a degree in early childhood education, Tong described similar concerns, noting that annual online trainings were lecture-based and provided limited insight into students with autism or ID.

Due to severe staffing shortages, Ton was hired to teach special education despite having no formal background in disability services. He relied on internet searches and other forms of self-instruction to support his work. He reflected: "Thai teachers have the capability to provide high-quality educational services to students if they are equipped with the essential knowledge and provided with adequate resources and training." Nonetheless, he felt staff shortages and the lack of preparation impeded his ability to provide effective services. Both Ton and Tong reported low confidence in their ability to implement IEPs, and all three indicated they needed training related to students with severe disabilities.

Northeast

Neither Northeastern participant held a special education degree. Despite this, Kampang reported feeling confident and prepared, which she attributed to trainings on IEPs and teaching strategies as well as support from hospitals and the local special education center. Daow was far less sanguine, however. She reported attending only two didactic training sessions that mostly addressed how to complete paperwork: "I barely got anything out of the IEP trainings. I was so confused and could not follow. It would have been better if I could practice what the trainers were teaching and get feedback during training." She also noted that no one at her school had experience with IEPs, leaving her ill-equipped to provide services.

South

Neither Southern participant had received formal preparation in special education. Both received biannual trainings mostly related to IEP documentation and had never received preparation related to children with developmental disabilities. Regardless, both expressed confidence in their roles because their caseloads exclusively consisted of students with LD. As Suchard suggested: "I think I have enough essential materials to support my students, as our school only has students with LD. But I would not feel prepared if the school were to have students with other disabilities, like autism."

Central

The three participants at sites in the Central region held formal degrees in special education and reported feeling prepared to serve students with a range of disabilities. They reported receiving professional development at least six times per year on topics ranging from IEPs to instruction for a range of disabilities, including LD and ID.

Perspectives on Inclusion and Instruction

Participants' consistent endorsement of the social benefits of inclusion was qualified by concerns about the suitability of general education instruction and accessibility.

North

Northern participants described both benefits and drawbacks of inclusive education. Ton reported that inclusion allowed students to interact and socialize with their peers, but believed that students with disabilities could not benefit academically within general education classrooms. Kaew also emphasized opportunities for students with disabilities to engage with their peers, and Tong agreed that inclusion enhanced social skills. However, Tong also raised concerns about classroom disruption and parental resistance to inclusion.

Northeast

Kampang identified social and community benefits of inclusion. Daow acknowledged the social benefits of inclusion but viewed it as less suitable for students who could not independently navigate the school environment.

South

Both Southern participants emphasized the social benefits of inclusion while also identifying potential challenges. Suda asserted that "Inclusion helps [students with disabilities] learn how to live and get along with the community." Suchard agreed but noted that the support needs of students with disabilities could also create peer pressure, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem.

Central

Nush acknowledged the importance of inclusive education for promoting socialization and enhancing educational outcomes for all students. Noina added that such an approach is particularly beneficial for the educational and social development of students who can navigate the school independently. Karn argued that the feasibility of inclusion depended on students' needs. She noted that public schools often offered limited accessibility for students with physical disabilities. She also stressed that students should have the opportunity to be part of the school community: "Every student must be able to go on every field trip there is, regardless of their disabilities. They must all have the opportunity to explore the community and be close to society as much as possible."

Discussion

This study assessed the perspectives of special educators across sites in Thailand's four regions. Educators generally affirmed the benefits of inclusion yet often reported teaching at least partly in self-contained settings. This divergence between attitudes ostensibly consistent with Whole Schooling and extant instructional arrangements may be due to the distinct challenges participants faced across sites. Participants at most Northern and Northeastern sites identified converging pressures created by parental disengagement, the stigma surrounding disability, material shortages, and limited training. They emphasized helping students make meaningful social progress rather than academic achievement. In contrast, participants at sites in the Central region reported effectively leveraging IEPs and professional development opportunities to deliver effective supports. Participants also reported having access to resources but limited input into their allocation. Southern special educators reported feeling prepared to serve students with LD, but indicated that a lack of training, combined with limited engagement from parents, inhibited their ability to educate students who require intensive supports. These findings illustrate how contextual, material, and institutional conditions—key components of the CHAT framework—shape educator access to effective training and inclusive practices (Nussbaumer, 2012).

The CHAT framework clarifies why a single national policy yields divergent practices across sites. Although participants shared a uniform object—effective services for students with disabilities—the configuration of factors differed across sites (Nussbaumer, 2012). In addition to confirming previously reported disparities (Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2022), the present findings underscore how various local conditions prevent inclusive practice. At sites in the Central region, educators held degrees in special education, schools reported robust materials and frequent professional development, and parents participated actively. The contradiction stemmed from rules, as Noina's account indicated the actual utility of available resources was constrained by local regulations. Educators at Northern and Northeastern sites, in contrast, encountered multiple barriers. Mediating artifacts were scarce (e.g., Ton delivered instruction in storage rooms); the division of labor was misaligned (e.g., Ton and Daow were reassigned into special education roles); and the community introduced resistance through stigma and fear that a disability label would prevent future employment.

Situating schools within activity systems frames disparities in the implementation of inclusion as the product of system configuration rather than individuals, indicating that contextual conditions may inhibit the realization of Whole Schooling beyond specific schools or educators. At the Northern and Northeastern sites, changes to classroom organization and lesson implementation—practices described in detail by Peterson and Hittie (2025) as essential to furthering Whole Schooling—would address educator concerns regarding their preparation. School leadership also mattered, as when the actions of Kampang's principal addressed gaps in transportation and secured partnerships with local organizations. The stigma surrounding disability in these communities, however, suggests that greater communal outreach may be needed to build support for Whole Schooling.

The composition of the present sample limits direct comparisons with earlier work; for example, the relative youth and inexperience of participants precluded an evaluation of the purported association between positive attitudes toward inclusion and teacher experience (Martinez & Fabella, 2023). With the exception of educators at Southern and Central sites, most participants identified limited resources and insufficient training as critical stressors, echoing previous findings (Kantavong & Kiettikunwong, 2020; Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2022; Sujarwanto et al., 2022). That these participants either criticized regulatory restrictions on the use of resources (Central participants) or suggested that available resources were commensurate to small caseloads (Southern participants) rather than identifying scarcity as the principal concern adds nuance to survey research that described such concerns in limited detail. As in earlier studies (e.g., Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2018), participants consistently identified the need for parents' cooperation and acceptance of the need for special education. Differences across sites, however, suggest that greater attention to geography—and factors correlated with geography—could provide greater insight into challenges encountered by special educators.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The study relied on a single translator and analyst. Although not essential for RTA (Braun et al., 2022), multiple coders could have contributed to the richness of interpretation. The small sample of educators may not capture the disparities between or within regions, as regions were confounded with other site characteristics (e.g., staff qualifications, urbanicity). Rather than provide a representative view of special education in Thailand, the current study provides insight into configurations of conditions at particular sites that can guide alternative approaches to assessing differences across regions. In addition to variables at the regional level, other community-level factors likely influenced the experiences described by participants. Similarly, the regional taxonomy featured in the present study, one of several in use (e.g., Tipayalai, 2020), may not capture the variation within regions. Future work in Thailand and elsewhere should continue to emphasize the importance of locale while obtaining the data needed to fully contextualize research findings whenever possible (Rila et al., 2025).

Implications for Practice

Essential training in supporting students with disabilities is urgently needed in much of Thailand. However, training programs must be tailored based on community diversity, available resources, and educators' backgrounds. Resource and knowledge disparities throughout Thailand often necessitate training experiences facilitated by municipal (e.g., Kantavong & Kiettikunwong, 2020) or international partners (e.g., Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2018). Although some adaptations, such as using the language of trainees, are universally effective (Ortiz & Del Vecchio, 2013), professional development must consider the culture of participating teachers and their communities. Methods for building rapport with families, selecting appropriate instructional goals, and implementing acceptable inclusive strategies may vary based on local economic conditions, religious traditions, and parents' education levels.

In terms of Whole Schooling (Peterson, 2025), these contextual differences indicate that shared principles may be furthered through different means. In areas with few resources, partnering with families and communities (Principle 6) and supporting students and educators (Principle 5) depend first on establishing basic material and training capacity; in areas with greater access to resources, the task may shift toward deploying existing resources flexibly and extending inclusion (Principle 3) to students with more intensive needs. While acknowledging differences across sites is critical, it should only serve as the initial basis for dialogue with service recipients (e.g., Lee et al., 2026). The Whole Schooling framework emphasizes the actions of educators and school culture as central features of inclusion (Peterson & Hittie, 2025). Our findings suggest that policy, resource allocation, staffing shortages, and community attitudes—many of which operate

above the level of any single school—must also be considered. Recognizing the range of barriers to inclusion of students with disabilities in international settings can inform more productive engagement with educators pursuing Whole Schooling in their communities.

Future Directions

Addressing severe resource disparities presents political challenges distinct from the task of identifying effective interventions or changing school culture. The ecological validity of many educational initiatives—or the extent to which tested practices translate to typical settings (Chezan et al., 2022)—remains underexamined in emerging economies like Thailand (Suphakicco, 2022). Effecting change would likely involve disseminating material resources, translating instructional materials, and preparing educators—all recognized as critical within Thailand (Ra-ngubtook & Bhongsatiern, 2024). As educators in the Central region suggest, resource-rich schools are still left with the fundamental question of how to implement Whole Schooling and other potentially beneficial practices.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data generated and analyzed during this study consist of audio recordings and interview transcripts in Thai that contain potentially identifying information. These data are not publicly available as participants did not consent to public sharing during recruitment. De-identified excerpts may be available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to appropriate confidentiality safeguards.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: MKR (Equal), SK (Equal); Formal Analysis: MKR (Lead); Investigation: MKR (Lead); Methodology: MKR (Equal), SK (Equal); Writing: SK (Equal), MKR (Equal).

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Iowa (Approval No. 202404300). All participants were adults and provided informed consent prior to participation.

Acknowledgment

The authors thank the educators who generously shared their time and perspectives.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency or organization.

Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to report.

Declaration of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

Generative AI was not used in the completion of this manuscript.

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