

Original Article

Changes in attitude and confidence of the Provincial Special Education Center's teachers toward teaching children with specific learning disabilities after short course training

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Abstract

Introduction: In Thailand, children with specific learning disabilities (SLD) are among majority of the children with special need who need support from teachers by providing appropriate learning strategies. However, many teachers assigned to teach these children have not been adequately prepared. Our research aimed to measure the effectiveness of short course training on changing attitudes and confidence toward teaching children with SLD.

Method: This prospective pre-and post-study was conducted among the teachers of the Provincial Special Education Center (PSEC). The one-day training program was provided by multidisciplinary specialists from the Thammasat University Hospital. Questionnaire on attitudes and confidence toward teaching children with SLD were answered by teachers, pre-and post-trained to measure effectiveness of the program.

Result: 49 teachers attended the training and completed pre-and post-training questionnaires. Most of them teach in parallel and/or resource classrooms. Only 18% of teachers were trained about SLD in college and 96% disclosed their need for more training about SLD. Questionnaires revealed significant positive changes in: confidence to identify children who has SLD, attitude that children with SLD do not have low ability and can be successful adults, belief that the SLD is a solvable problem, and diagnosis of SLD can help teachers understand how to support these students. However, the factors of sex, age, educational background and teaching experience did not reveal significant correlation with changing in scores indicating attitude or confidence toward teaching children with SLD.

Conclusion: Teachers of PSEC generally have good attitude toward teaching children with SLD, however they are not adequately prepared. These short-course training could help them feel more confidence to identify children with SLD and enhance their positive attitude about ability and future success of these children.

Keywords: learning disabilities, dyslexia, teacher attitude, training program, Thailand

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Introduction

Specific learning disabilities (SLD), such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia, are common neurological developmental disorders. The prevalence of children with SLD in Thailand has been reported to be 6 - 9%.^{1,2} Early detection and intervention generally leads to better outcomes.^{3, 4} However, manifesting these improvements remains challenging as detection within the school system is limited.² With no formal screening in practice, many children with SLD are undiagnosed leading to academic, behavioral and emotional problems. Moreover, when children who need intervention are discovered, support systems are not adequate.

Starting in 1999, a system of Provincial Special Education Centers (PSECs) was established in most Thai provinces. These centers operate under the auspices of the Special Education Bureau, Ministry of Education and are responsible for three main tasks.⁵ First, they provide early intervention programs for young children before entering compulsory education. Second, PSECs develop special education educators and staff by promoting teaching skills for them. Finally, PSECs support public schools in the management of special needs education by establishing parallel classrooms, providing teachers for the parallel classroom, and helping teachers develop Individual Educational Program (IEP) to mainstream special needs children. Nonetheless, many PSECs teachers do not yet have the appropriate education to manage SLD; only a few of them graduate with bachelor/master's degrees in special education.⁶ For general teachers in Thailand, special needs education is not a mandatory subject in college as it is usually offered as an elective course.^{7,8}

The teacher's ability to manage children with SLD is derived from their knowledge about SLD and their attitudes toward these children.⁹ Teachers lacking in adequate knowledge about SLD, the learning needs of these children, and how to help them, become disempowered; these teachers may inadvertently express negativity toward these learners.¹⁰⁻¹²

These attitudes may subtly impinge on their teaching practices, affect relationships with their students, and could be correlated with lessened teacher expectations and consequently poorer academic outcomes for children with SLD.¹² Subsequent to this, students with SLD report their self-esteem and success in school is affected by educator's attitudes.¹³ Teacher preparation and/or professional development play an important role in developing positive attitudes and competency toward educating students with SLD.¹⁴ Large amounts of research have revealed that professional development usually improves teacher knowledge with better practices, and helping student progression in literacy skills.¹⁵

At Thammasat University Hospital (TUH), Pathumthani, a team of multidisciplinary professionals focusing on the care of children with special needs (including a developmental pediatrician, child psychiatrist, speech therapist, occupational therapist, and child psychologist) have been working with the PSEC to expand their teachers' capabilities to support children with special needs. Short course trainings in various topics are arranged 1 - 2 times/year. Notably, SLD is one of the most requested themes by staff and teachers, with their comments illustrating they lack confidence to work with schools to help these children. In our study, we elicited teachers' baseline attitudes and confidence toward teaching children with SLD and then measured the effectiveness of short course training in changing attitudes and confidence.

Methods

This prospective pre-and post-study was conducted in October 2016 in Pathumthani province among the teachers of the PSEC. The research was approved by Thammasat University Ethics Committee, 2016. Pathumthani province is located about 50 km north of Bangkok in the geographic center of Thailand, and is divided into seven districts; the total popula-

tion of the province is 1.074 million. There are 150 public schools affiliated with the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC). The PSEC cooperates with these schools and has created parallel classrooms in 22 schools in the province.

Participants: There were 68 teachers/staff members working at the PSEC during our study period. A sample size of 32 was required for α of 0.05 with a power of 0.80 in order to detect an effect size of 0.5 and have an SD \pm 1. Only teachers who signed the informed consent, completed the short course training, and answered both pre-and post-training questionnaires were included.

Training: The one-day training program was a lecture and workshop provided by the team of multidisciplinary professionals from TUH. The lecture and workshop covered 3 main topics. First, basic knowledge about SLD was presented: definition, functional brain imaging deviations, signs of SLD, awareness of phonological and visual-spatial weaknesses, and SLD detection. Second, knowledge was given regarding the effects of SLD on affected children and also their families, how to handle children's self-esteem issues, helping families understand SLD, and then giving a positive examples of people with SLD. Finally, the workshop consisted of exposure to the basic keys of intervention such as phonemic awareness instruction, phonics instruction, fluency training, comprehension training, visual-spatial training, and various techniques to improve writing.

Measurement: Demographic data about age, sex, educational background and teaching experience were collected. Modified questionnaire on attitudes and confidence toward teaching children with SLD

was adapted from the previous study of Gwernan-Jones, 2010⁹ and contents validation were done by developmental and behavioral pediatrician special education teacher and child psychiatrists with face validation technique. The questionnaire is a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with 14 questions, divided into 2 parts. The questionnaires were answered by teachers, pre-and post-training. A total frequency score was derived from the sum of items (including the reversed scores), with higher scores representing more positive responses.

Statistical analysis: Descriptive analysis was used for demographic data and questionnaire score was analyzed with paired T-test. Multivariable analysis was used to find the correlation between positive changes in score and the factors of sex, age, educational background and teaching experience.

Results

A total of 54 teachers of the PSEC attended the workshop, and 49 of these completed pre-and post-training questionnaires. Most teachers are female (87.5%) with a mean age of 33 ± 7.5 years. Demographic data are presented in Table 1. Most of them had 1 - 5 years of teaching experience in parallel classrooms and/or resource rooms. About half of them graduated with degree of education; 14% had a degree in special needs education. Otherwise teachers had alternative degrees, such as in communications, fine arts, and political science. Only 18% had been formally trained to understand SLD in college, 58% previously attended short course trainings about SLD, and 16% were never trained on SLD.

Table 1 Demographic data of PSEC teachers

	Demographic data	N (Percent)
Gender	Female	42 (85.7)
	Male	7 (14.3)
Degree	Bachelor of education	17 (34.7)
	Bachelor degree of special education	6 (12.2)
	Master degree of special education	1 (2.0)
	Bachelor degree in other fields	25 (51.0)
Teaching experience	< 1 year	5 (10.2)
	1 - 5 years	26 (53.1)
	5 - 10 years	12 (24.5)
	> 10 years	6 (12.2)
Teaching experience of student with SLD	< 1 year	21 (42.9)
	1 - 5 years	21 (42.9)
	> 5 years	7 (14.2)
Job description	Teaching in parallel classrooms	38 (77.5)
	Teaching in the PSEC	9 (18.4)
	Teaching in resource room	2 (4.1)
Previously training about SLD	Never trained	8 (16.6)
	In college	9 (18.8)
	Long course training (\geq 1 month)	3 (6.3)
	Short course training (< 1 month)	28 (58.3)

Before attended the training, most teachers believed that children with SLD could be successful adults and have strengths apart from academic skills. However, some felt that these children have lower abilities than peers. They also mentioned that the label of SLD could help teachers understand how to support these children, but many of them disagreed or were not sure that the label of SLD could

help children understand themselves. Most of them expressed that they felt they could support learning for students with SLD in some way. Nonetheless, almost all teachers mentioned that educators need to be taught more about SLD than what is currently given. Only one-fourth of the teachers were confident in identifying children with SLD (Table 2).

Table 2 Comparison of number and percentage of teachers' response pre and post-training

Questions	Pre-training			Post-training		
	Agree & Strongly agree	Neutral	Disagree & Strongly disagree	Agree & Strongly agree	Neutral	Disagree & Strongly disagree
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Questions about attitude toward teaching students with SLD						
Students with SLD can succeed as adults	44 (89.8)	5 (10.2)	0 (0.0)	47 (95.9)	1 (2.0)	1 (2.0)
SLD sound as a problem that can be solved	42 (85.7)	4 (8.2)	3 (6.1)	46 (93.9)	1 (2.0)	2 (4.1)
The label "SLD" can help a student know they are not stupid or lazy	19 (38.8)	20 (40.8)	10 (20.4)	23 (46.9)	10 (20.4)	16 (32.7)
The label "SLD" can help understand how to support the learner	43 (87.7)	4 (8.2)	2 (4.1)	49 (100)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Students with SLD have strengths in other things apart from academic skills	46 (93.9)	0 (0.0)	3 (6.1)	48 (97.7)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.0)
The label "SLD" can be an excuse for student to stop trying*	3 (6.1)	12 (24.5)	34 (69.4)	2 (4.1)	7 (14.3)	40 (81.6)
Students with SLD actually have low ability*	6 (12.3)	13 (26.5)	30 (61.2)	6 (12.4)	5 (10.2)	38 (77.6)
Teaching students with SLD is a school burden*	5 (10.2)	15 (30.6)	29 (59.2)	4 (8.2)	1 (2.0)	44 (89.8)
The label "SLD" can make students stop trying*	7 (14.3)	7 (14.3)	35 (71.4)	7 (14.3)	8 (16.3)	34 (69.4)
Questions about confidence toward teaching students with SLD						
I can tell which student has SLD	13 (26.5)	26 (53.1)	10 (20.4)	32 (65.3)	12 (24.5)	5 (10.2)
I feel confident that I could support the learning of student with SLD	40 (81.6)	8 (16.3)	1 (2.0)	42 (85.7)	5 (10.2)	2 (4.1)
I feel more training should be given to teachers about SLD	47 (95.9)	1 (2.0)	1 (2.0)	47 (95.5)	1 (2.0)	1 (2.0)
Teaching students with SLD is worrisome*	4 (8.2)	6 (12.2)	39 (79.6)	4 (8.2)	3 (6.1)	42 (85.7)
Managing extra-curriculum teaching to support students with SLD is difficult*	5 (10.2)	12 (24.5)	32 (65.3)	1 (2.0)	6 (12.4)	42 (85.7)

A comparison of the positive changes of mean score pre-training and post-training can be seen in table 3. Statements in the questionnaire that indicate significant positive changes of mean score were: “I believe that children with SLD can succeed as adults”; “I think that SLD is a solvable problem”; “The label SLD can help teachers understand how to support students”; “I think I can tell which student has SLD”; reverse question: “I think children with SLD actually have low abilities”.

Multivariable analysis was used with the factors of sex, age, educational background and teaching experience to find correlations with positive changes in scores indicating attitude or confidence toward teaching children with SLD; no factors showed significant correlation.

Table 3 Comparison of the positive changes in mean score in attitude and confidence toward teaching children with SLD, pre- and post-training

Questions	Mean score pre-training	Mean score post-training	Difference	95% CI	P - value
Questions about attitude toward teaching students with SLD					
Students with SLD can succeed as adults	4.04	4.53	0.48	0.27 - 0.70	0.000
SLD sound as a problem that can be solved	4.04	4.51	0.47	0.12 - 0.81	0.009
The label “SLD” can help a student know they are not stupid or lazy	3.10	3.14	0.04	-0.93 - 0.48	0.851
The label “SLD” can help teachers understand how to support the learner	4.18	4.55	0.37	0.12 - 0.61	0.004
Students with SLD have strengths in other things apart from academic skills	4.28	4.55	0.26	-0.21 - 0.55	0.068
The label “SLD” can be an excuse for student to stop trying*	3.88	4.10	0.22	0.13 - 0.58	0.213
Students with SLD actually have low ability*	3.61	3.98	0.36	0.17 - 0.71	0.040
Teaching students with SLD is a school burden*	4.24	4.40	0.16	-0.12 - 0.44	0.252
The label “SLD” can make students stop trying*	3.75	4.04	0.29	-0.12 - 0.68	0.159
Questions about confidence toward teaching students with SLD					
I can tell which student has SLD	3.06	3.77	0.71	0.39 - 1.00	0.000
I feel confident that I could support the learning of student with SLD	4.00	4.27	0.26	-0.38 - 0.57	0.085
I feel more training should be given to teachers about SLD	4.29	4.48	0.20	-0.23 - 0.43	0.077
Teaching students with SLD is worrisome*	4.08	4.24	0.16	-0.15 - 0.48	0.306
Managing extra-curriculum teaching to support students with SLD is difficult*	3.80	3.92	0.12	-0.19 - 0.44	0.436

Discussion

Before attending our training program, teachers of the PSEC who were familiar with teaching children with various special needs generally had a good attitude toward children with SLD. They believed in potential future success for these students and the students' possible alternative abilities; they understand that children with SLD are not just children who do not try hard enough in school. However, due to the critical lack of special educators employed by the PSEC, it was obvious that overall, the teachers had limited knowledge about SLD. Half of PSEC teachers did not even graduate in the education field. The other one-third is general teachers, who admitted in the questionnaires that they were rarely trained on SLD in colleges. A substantial body of international research has indicated that teachers who do not graduate in the special needs area perceive their general education programs in college were inadequate in preparing them for teaching students with learning disabilities.^{16, 17, 18} While some PSEC staffs learned about SLD in colleges and many of them had previously attended short/long course trainings, 96% of them disclosed they needed far more training/education about SLD. Our findings were very similar to previous research from other developing countries. For example, in India, the majority of teachers wanted to undergo further training about learning disabilities because they perceive themselves to be lack a sufficient knowledge base to provide specific teaching for these children.¹⁹ In Bosnia and Montenegro almost all teachers felt more training should be given on dyslexia.²⁰

The teachers of PSEC are required to take care of children with several diverse special needs: SLD, intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy; they felt it was difficult to identify which children actually have SLD. Although prior to our training, most teachers agreed/strongly agreed that they could support the learning of SLD children, only 25% of these teachers had adequate confidence

to identify children who have SLD. Further discussion with PSEC teachers, many of them admitted that they were confused regarding the differences between SLD, cognitive impairment and attention problems, consistent with previously reported studies across Asia e.g. in Japan and India, many teachers were also unsure if their students have learning disabilities.^{21 - 23}

Confusion over the definition of SLD among PSEC teachers likely to impact the quality of their teaching and may lead to sense of helplessness atmosphere among teachers and students when teachers were not really know how to support and students achievement were not progress.^{11, 12} Our training program focused on the definition of SLD, fundamental weakness and clinical features of SLD. Post training, 75% of teachers became confident in identifying children Teachers also showed a significant positive change in attitude that children with SLD do not have low ability and can be successful as adults with proper support; this was another aspect that was underlined in our training. Research confirms that higher teacher's expectations leads to a greater effort made by the teacher correlate with a positive change in a student's achievement.²⁴ Hence outcome from our training that effect positive expectation in ability of children with SLD might be the first step for success in school.

Results from the training also revealed a positive change in belief that SLD is a solvable problem and that the label of SLD could help teachers understand better how to support SLD affected students. As the training introduced evidence-based successful intervention for SLD, teachers with limited information about effective SLD management should become more confident to support students and believe in learning progress according to proper intervention. However, 10% of teachers still faced challenges to manage extra-curriculum teaching for students with SLD. Two factors were reported from further discussion with them; work load and a lack of support from school directors. Challenging in

implementing knowledge to real-life practice have been reported in previous research; lacking of time for developing dyslexic friendly resources, large classes which effected personal attention for students, workload of teachers.^{10, 21} More research is needed to identify specific challenges and how these can be overcome.

One noticeable observation (pre-and post-training) was the high number of teachers who were either uncertain or disagreed that the label of SLD could help children understand themselves better. One reason may be the lack of public understanding about SLD. Even in countries where information about SLD is widely available, the majority of parents, friends, and lay people have little knowledge of learning disabilities^{25 - 27} and label with SLD may be cause stigmatization for children with SLD because of misunderstanding.²⁸ In Thailand, although the Government has implemented a number of laws, and policies pertaining to people with disabilities to ensure equality (i.e. no discrimination) in education, employment, and access to public services and welfare.²⁹ There are still gaps in implementing the policy and discrimination were still pervades both in education and employment systems.^{30, 31} This suggest that more work in needed to increase the understanding, and so reduce the stigmatization, of SLD among parents and populace as a whole to promote positive view of children with SLD.

Our study had limitations. First, it was a small and quasi-experimental study which did not have control group because we intended to train all teachers of PSEC, but without any training, we assume that the attitude and confidence is hardly altering within a one day period. Second, we measured a short term benefit of training and did not repeat the questionnaire over the medium and long term period. In addition, the study was not designed to look at the effect on training of teaching practice or outcome for SLD affected children. Future studies should focus on

the long term benefits on teachers of training, other factors that may affect teaching practice e.g. workload as well as learning achievement and quality of life of children with SLD.

PSEC teachers generally have positive attitudes for teaching children with SLD, however, they are not adequately trained. Short-course trainings could help them feel more confident to identify and support children with SLD and enhance their positive attitudes and benefit SLD affected children.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

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บทคัดย่อ

การเปลี่ยนแปลงทัศนคติและความมั่นใจในการดูแลเด็กที่มีปัญหาบกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้ของครูศูนย์การศึกษาพิเศษภายหลังการอบรมระยะสั้น

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บทนำ: เด็กที่มีภาวะบกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้เป็นเด็กที่มีความต้องการพิเศษกลุ่มใหญ่ในประเทศไทยที่จำเป็นต้องได้รับการช่วยเหลือจากครูโดยการจัดการเรียนการสอนที่เหมาะสม อย่างไรก็ตามในปัจจุบันพบว่าครูจำนวนมากที่ได้รับมอบหมายให้ทำหน้าที่สอนเด็กกลุ่มนี้ยังไม่ได้รับการเตรียมความพร้อมอย่างเพียงพอ งานวิจัยนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อวัดประสิทธิผลของการจัดการอบรมระยะสั้นเกี่ยวกับภาวะบกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้ให้กับครู โดยการวัดความเปลี่ยนแปลงของทัศนคติและความมั่นใจในการสอนเด็กกลุ่มนี้

วิธีการศึกษา: เป็นการศึกษาไปข้างหน้าเพื่อศึกษาผลของการอบรมเชิงปฏิบัติการเกี่ยวกับภาวะบกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้ ซึ่งจัดโดยทีมสหวิชาชีพของโรงพยาบาลธรรมศาสตร์เฉลิมพระเกียรติ โดยของครูที่สังกัดศูนย์การศึกษาพิเศษประจำจังหวัดที่เข้ารับการอบรมจะทำการตอบแบบสอบถามเกี่ยวกับทัศนคติและความมั่นใจในการสอนเด็กที่มีภาวะบกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้ก่อนและภายหลังการอบรม

ผลการศึกษา: มีครูจำนวน 49 คนที่เข้าร่วมการอบรมและตอบแบบสอบถามก่อนและหลังการอบรมอย่างครบถ้วน พบว่าครูส่วนใหญ่ทำหน้าที่สอนในห้องเรียน โดยครูมีเพียงร้อยละ 18 เท่านั้นที่ระบุว่าเคยได้เรียนเกี่ยวกับเรื่องภาวะบกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้มาในระดับปริญญา และครูส่วนใหญ่ระบุว่าครูควรได้รับการอบรมเกี่ยวกับเรื่องนี้ให้มากขึ้น จากแบบสอบถามพบว่าการเปลี่ยนแปลงของคะแนนอย่างมีนัยสำคัญภายหลังการอบรมในประเด็น ได้แก่ ความมั่นใจที่จะบอกว่าเด็กคนใดน่าจะมีภาวะบกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้ ทัศนคติว่าเด็กกลุ่มนี้ไม่ได้มีความสามารถต่ำ สามารถประสบความสำเร็จได้เมื่อโตขึ้น ภาวะบกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้เป็นภาวะที่แก้ไขได้ และการวินิจฉัยว่าเด็กมีภาวะบกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้จะช่วยให้ครูช่วยเหลือเด็กได้ดีขึ้น อย่างไรก็ตามจากการวิเคราะห์การถดถอยพหุคูณ ยังไม่พบความสัมพันธ์ระหว่าง เพศ อายุ การศึกษา ประสบการณ์ในการสอนของครูกับการเปลี่ยนแปลงของคะแนนทัศนคติและความมั่นใจในการสอนเด็กที่มีภาวะบกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้

สรุปผลการศึกษา: ครูที่เข้ารับการอบรมมีทัศนคติโดยรวมที่ดีต่อเด็กที่มีภาวะบกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้ อย่างไรก็ตามครูยังไม่ได้ได้รับการเตรียมความพร้อมอย่างเพียงพอสำหรับการสอน การอบรมเชิงปฏิบัติการนี้สามารถช่วยเสริมให้ครูมีความมั่นใจบอกว่าเด็กน่าจะมีภาวะบกพร่องด้านการเรียนรู้ รวมถึงช่วยส่งเสริมทัศนคติที่ดีต่อเด็กกลุ่มนี้ให้มากขึ้น

คำสำคัญ: แอลดี, บกพร่องทางการเรียนรู้, ทัศนคติของครู, การอบรม, ประเทศไทย