

Cambodian Teachers' Experiences of Inclusive Education for Students with Neuro-developmental Disabilities

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As the educational system recovers from destabilization following the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia gradually progresses toward sustainable and equitable education. Yet, inclusive educational access remains challenging for many rural Cambodian students with disabilities, especially those with neuro-developmental disabilities (NDD) (e.g., autism spectrum disorder [ASD], Down syndrome [DS]) due to lack of resources, teacher attainment and retainment, insufficient professional development in disability and inclusive education, teacher efficacy, and shortage of professionals specializing in inclusive and disability education. This paper explores how 19 general and special education teachers support ASD and DS students' learning and sense of belonging across five rural primary schools in Kampot, Cambodia. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach with in-depth focus group interviews, participants shared understandings and experiences of working with ASD and/or DS young people, shedding light onto the essence of school belonging within the phenomenon of inclusive education. Emerging thematic findings highlighted (1) cultivating a climate of inclusion within schools; (2) ways of enhancing inclusive education; (3) navigating dilemmas of inclusion. Within this particular Southeast Asian context, participants conveyed insights regarding the complex terrains of inclusive education, raising questions about suitability of inclusion ideals in light of Cambodia's socio-cultural/political/historical context.

Key Words: autism spectrum disorder, down syndrome, inclusive education, neuro-developmental disability, primary school teachers, Cambodia

Introduction

Globally, inclusion is a highly contested and ambiguous concept for many teachers, as they experience daily realities of classrooms filled with multiplicities of diversity. Despite variations in how inclusion is defined and enacted, a general consensus remains that inclusion relates to fostering sense of belonging, acceptance, and maximum participation of all students as full members in their school community with access to regular education classrooms. Frankel et al. (2010) highlighted four key principles of inclusion that serve as a conduit between ideology and implementation: (1) democratic philosophy, (2) local and international mandates and policies, (3) respect for ethnoculturally diverse children with disabilities and families, and (4) individualized planning (p. 4). Katz (2013) contended inclusive education pertains to both academic and social inclusion. Namely, all students engage with their peers in academic activities and curricula, whilst also feeling a sense of belonging within the school community.

Despite challenges in implementing inclusion, such as pejorative attitudes and beliefs, teacher professional learning (in-service and pre-service), teacher experience with children with disabilities, funding, and human and physical resources, the research clearly reports the benefits of inclusive education for students with or without disabilities (Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010; Katz, 2013; Lindsay et al., 2014). For example, within inclusive classrooms children with disabilities demonstrate improved social integration and are presented with higher academic expectations and academic goals. Furthermore, there is no substantial difference when comparing academic scores and standardized testing among students with or without disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Research consistently conveys positive outcomes for all children within inclusive environments, demonstrating benefits in social, cognitive, moral, language, and motor development (Katz, 2013; Ostrosky et al., 2006). More specifically, in children with disabilities there are improvements in areas of higher-order thinking, numeracy, and literacy, and among children without disabilities, studies suggest increase knowledge about disabilities, empathy and stronger understandings of diversity, and a greater willingness to interact and form friendships with children with disabilities (Katz, 2013; Ostrosky et al., 2006).

Foundational elements of inclusive education include belief systems of respect for diversity, social justice, and relationships. Teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and sense of efficacy play paramount roles in supporting inclusion

(Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010; Kaur et al., 2016; Lindsay et al., 2014; Malak, 2013a, 2013b; Ostrosky et al., 2006; Sokal & Sharma, 2014). Teachers' understandings of diversity influence the inclusion process, including inclusive curricula and pedagogy (Ajodhia-Andrews, 2016). Attitudes and beliefs impact teacher behaviour toward students with disabilities, and moreover influence behaviour and attitudes of students without disabilities. Factors such as type of children's disabilities (i.e., mild vs. physical/sensory vs. complex), educational environment (i.e., physical and human resources), professional learning, expertise, funding, time, and workload collectively influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Kalyanpur, 2011; Sokal & Sharma, 2014). Without positive beliefs and attitudes teacher resistance toward inclusive education reform intensify (Malak, 2013a, 2013b).

Understandings of inclusion principles, its interpretations, and how these are implemented within schools and classrooms differ depending on the socio-cultural, political, and historical context of a community (Frankel et al., 2010; Malak, 2013a, 2013b; Kamenopoulou, 2018; Meekosha & Soldatic, 2011). Many developing Southeast Asian countries strive to implement inclusive education and are employing inclusive international treaties, such as those purported by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), Millennium goals, etc. Various global South countries, for example, have signed and ratified these treaties, and governments are creating country-wide inclusive education goals; e.g., Cambodia's Ministry of Education and Youth's devised a strategic plan for implementation of inclusive education across the country by 2018 (Kamenopoulou, 2018). Yet, many Southeast Asian countries lack specific inclusive education legislation (Hosshan et al., 2020).

Additionally, these treaties are not always suited to particular socio-political and cultural contexts, leading to misunderstandings surrounding interpretation and implementation of inclusion ideals (Cheras, 2014; Hosshan et al., 2020; Kalyanpur, 2011, 2014), particularly within schools. Within Southeast Asian countries the impact of poverty on young people with disabilities poses many injustices related to societal, environmental, attitudinal, and institutional barriers, and intensifies in rural areas (Bourke & Waite, 2013). These young people experience stigmatization and discrimination, and often are not provided basic necessities (Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010; Baffoe, 2013; Secker, 2012; Yeo & Morre, 2003). Due to limited access to societal opportunities and resources, such as education, poverty rates heighten among young people with disabilities (Barron & Manombe Ncube, 2010). In

addition to poverty, other factors influencing educational access for children with disabilities in developing Southeast Asian countries include distance between home and school, lack of teacher knowledge and experience regarding disability, lack of resources and training, inadequate funding, cultural seclusion, and poor execution of legislation (Aide et Action International [AeAI], 2015; Hosshan et al., 2020). Many children with disabilities attending school in developing world contexts are placed within segregated classes and/or classroom environments with scarce human and material resources; these children are often the most overlooked group on national agendas (Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010; Kalyanpur, 2014; Yeo & Morre, 2003).

Inclusive education in developing nations is used as a tool to ameliorate the impact of poverty and provide further opportunities for young people with disabilities, however, teachers' experiences of inclusion within the global South remain underexplored. Considering the complex legacy of Southeast Asian countries and its distinctive context among the "intersections between disabling factors like poverty, gender or disability" (Kamenopoulou, 2018, p. 1193), it is imperative to examine the inclusion process, particularly from the voices of those experiencing it in the local context, such as teachers.

Context of the Study

This study took place in the Chhouk district of Kampot, a rural province located along the southern coast of Cambodia, accounting for approximately 4.4% of Cambodia's overall population (National Institute of Statistics, Ministry of Planning, 2008). Within rural Cambodia, educational advancement and access remain low (Asian Development Bank, 2014; BBC Media Action, 2012; CIA, 2016). If children are provided access to education questions arise as to the quality of the learning and teaching (Phin, 2014; Sok et al., 2010). Approximately 90% of Cambodian young people with disabilities experience very limited or often no access to any form of education (AeAI, 2015; Siska & Suchanek, 2015). Within these areas Cambodian young people with disabilities and their families are among the most isolated, discriminated, and economically disadvantaged groups, with many young people struggling to access education and health/medical/therapeutic care (Komar Pikar Foundation, 2011). Cambodians with neuro-developmental disabilities (NDD) specifically experience greater exclusion than any other particular group of disorder/disability (Moreira, 2011). For instance, as Burkhardt (2014) explained, Cambodian young people with NDD experience exclusion from public schools due to fear, discrimination, and inadequate teacher training.

Inclusive education for Cambodian young people with NDD, although a long-term goal, currently poses challenges in implementation (Carter, 2009). One primary barrier to inclusive education in Cambodia includes inadequate teacher preparation and professional development (Arnold, 2015; Bines & Lei, 2011; Carter, 2009; Hosshan et al., 2020; Siska & Suchanek, 2015).

Consequently, there is no expectation for Cambodian teachers to provide inclusive education for students with NDD (Burkhardt, 2014). Some general education teachers in rural Cambodia, for example, report feeling unprepared to adapt curriculum/teaching programs and provide the necessary accommodations to support disabled students in regular classrooms, particularly those with NDD (Moreira, 2011). There is also a sense of unwillingness to educate students with NDD due to the low status attributed to these young people and their families (Moreira, 2011).

Although teacher education surrounding disability and inclusion is on the radar for the Cambodian Ministry of Education, challenges remain in execution and content delivery. For instance, within the Provincial Teacher Training Colleges, there are limited inclusive education courses and within these courses instructors report having insufficient knowledge and short course duration (i.e., 4-5 days) (Siska & Suchanek, 2015). International organizations and NGOs facilitate a majority of professional development and teacher education (Carter, 2009). Yet Siska and Suchanek (2015) asserted that such inclusive education courses serve as a "...compromise between the government and development partners (NGOs, international donors) rather than an effective tool for the inclusion of children with disabilities and building the capacity of tutors at PTTCs [Provincial Teacher Training Colleges]" (p. 86). Consequently, teachers report the level of competency as the number one barrier to inclusive education (Siska & Suchanek, 2015). Additionally, Cambodian schools utilize a system of school "clusters," whereby groups of schools share access to special education/inclusion specialist, professional development, and resources, and where possible rely on expertise from special education schools (Bines & Lei, 2011).

Cambodia is gradually progressing toward a more sustainable and equitable education system in hopes of achieving economic growth and poverty reduction. Yet, with scarce resources and funds, particularly within rural areas, challenges remain concerning accountability, attracting and retaining teachers, acquiring material resources, and professional development to support quality teaching (Phin, 2014); many other developing Southeast

Asian countries echo similar challenges in its quest toward inclusive education (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2014, 2015; Grimes et al., 2011; Hosshan et al., 2020; Kalyanpur, 2011, 2014; Kaur et al., 2016; Sheehy & Budiyanoto, 2014). Compounding these challenges are Cambodia's socio-cultural, historical, and political context (i.e., Khmer Rouge legacy and long-term conflict). The MoEys' education strategic plan (2014-2018) to implement sustainable inclusive education in the country recently ended, and thus there is a need to better understand how Cambodian teachers support learning and sense of school belonging, especially among those working with young people with NDD. In doing so, this requires engaging those involved within the inclusion process, as they (re)envision inclusive education grounded within personal lived realities. This paper examines how these teachers foster a sense of belonging for young people with NDD, more specifically those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and Down syndrome (DS).

Methods

This paper describes a qualitative phenomenological study exploring 19 general and special education teachers' understandings of inclusive education for young people with NDD across five primary schools in Kampot, Cambodia. Through in-depth focus group interviews of approximately 90-120 minutes, participants shared insights and experiences of inclusion/exclusion in their work with NDD students.

Undergirded by a phenomenological approach, the study focuses on the essence of belonging and acceptance within inclusive education and educators' meaning-making of this phenomenon - how it is experienced, described, and understood by participants' lived realities within their particular contexts (Bourke, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1990, 2002). Discussions of personal experience through phenomenological research allow educators to reflect upon the meaning of inclusive education in relation to their lives, while simultaneously developing personal "pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact" (van Manen, 2002, p. 2). This paper considers what it means for educators to support a sense of belonging for students with NDD in rural Cambodia. What factors limit or enhance inclusive education within rural Cambodia? From a developing Southeast Asian context, this paper presents a first-person voice and perspective of educators' experiences as they progress toward inclusive education.

Participants

The province of Kampot, primary schools, and participants were conveniently selected by the supporting organization of this study (i.e., Komar Pikar Foundation), as the researcher was unable to recruit participants prior to arrival in Cambodia. Due to possible coercion from the organization, it would have been ideal for neutral persons within the communities to aid in the recruitment process. However, this was not feasible, as the researcher did not have any other contacts in Cambodia; she was referred by a colleague to the Komar Pikar Foundation. To reduce the amount of potential coercion, the researcher developed a recruitment flyer to distribute among various schools. A purposive sample was also used to recruit participants by the organization. Teachers were recruited if aligning with the following inclusion criteria: (1) teaching young people with ASD and/or DS as a general education teacher in mainstream public school classrooms, regardless of the number of years; and/or (2) teaching young people with ASD and/or DS as a special needs/disability teacher in segregated public school classroom regardless of the number of years; and/or (3) teaching at a primary level (grades 1-6).

The sample consisted of 19 general education (GE) and special education/disability (SE/D) teachers across five rural primary schools in Kampot, Cambodia. See the table below for participant details:

	General education teachers (n = 10)	Special education/disability teachers (n = 9)
Number of years teaching in primary schools	13 – 29 years	9 months -5 years
Number of participants who completed the Ministry of Education 2 year Pedagogy School	9	0
Number of participants who engaged in consistent disability and inclusion training	3	9
Number of participants who completed high-school	10	1
Number of participants who were awarded non-teaching certifications/degrees (e.g., psychology)	0	2

Data Collection and Procedure

The researcher conducted the study during a 2-month process (the study also included other participant groups, however this paper highlights only teachers' perspectives). She met with the supporting organization numerous times to review aims of the study and receive administrative consent. The organization recruited all participants and organized interview times and meeting locations based upon participants' convenience. During a 1-week data collection period the researcher facilitated semi-structured open-ended focus-group teacher interviews of 90-120 minutes, examining how these educators support learning and sense of school belonging among ASD and/or DS students. The researcher facilitated two focus group interviews, consisting of 9 participants in one group (SE/D teachers) and 10 in the other (GE teachers). Participants were asked to share their teaching background, experiences working with ASD and/or DS young people, as well as their understandings of inclusive education within their local context. Interviews were conducted at the primary schools, either in private classrooms or outdoor picnic areas. The researcher also took researcher field notes, and gathered documents.

Prior to commencing interviews, the researcher received informed consent from all participants. She reviewed the consent forms, interview process, confidentiality and privacy/data security, voluntary nature of involvement and right to withdraw, and dissemination of research results. Consent forms were translated into Khmer, and a local Cambodian translator attended all interviews for linguistic and contextual interpretation support. Throughout interviews, the researcher also engaged in member-checking sharing participants' responses to allow for clarification and verification in her efforts to portray their understandings as they wish.

Data Analysis

All interviews were professionally transcribed and all data (transcripts, notes, documents) coded for rich descriptions of participants' meaning making of inclusive education. More specifically, examining how these two particular groups of educators (i.e., GE and SE/D teachers) experience inclusive education, and seeking commonalities and differences between these experiences to shed light on the essence of belonging within the phenomenon of inclusive education (Patton, 1990). The researcher searched for experiences, descriptions, and understandings of participants' lived realities of fostering a

sense of belonging as they work toward inclusive education for NDD young people within rural Cambodia.

In doing so, the researcher read and re-read transcripts, aligning closely with the data whilst also acknowledging her personal biases and experiences regarding inclusive education. The researcher served as a behavioural therapist for young people with autism and other neurodevelopmental disabilities for over 20 years, and has taught, researched, and published in areas of childhood disability and inclusive education. As a Professor, the researcher used her clinical therapeutic training and research agenda to support students, children, and families in their experiences with neuro-disability, diversity, and inclusion. In engaging with this study, the researcher attempted to place aside (i.e., bracket) personal presumptions and conceptualizations surrounding inclusive education to ensure data surrounding the phenomenon emerged in its own context.

The researcher noted and developed initial and focused codes, followed by statement extraction and grouping/categorizing these based on similar meanings. After grouping participants' statements, the researcher began interpreting these texturally (i.e., what happened?) and structurally (i.e., how is school inclusion [the phenomenon] experienced?) to develop "overall" descriptions of participants' understandings of inclusive education and the essence of school belonging (Creswell, 2013, p.150). The researcher bracketed, coded, clustered, and categorized primary data, identifying themes and creatively synthesizing participants' interpretations of personal experiences of inclusive education to portray deeper insights of school belonging (Patton, 1990). The researcher presents the data as key themes with direct quotations from interview transcripts.

Findings

Emerging thematic findings guided the researcher in developing portrayals of how a group of rural Cambodian educators foster school belonging as they work toward inclusive education for young people with NDD. Themes included: (1) cultivating a climate of inclusion within schools; (2) ways of enhancing inclusive education; and (3) navigating dilemmas of inclusion. Throughout the findings participants highlighted the benefits and challenges of implementing inclusive education within this particular rural Southeast Asian context.

Developing a School Culture of Inclusion

As participants shared understandings and experiences of how they foster school belonging for young people with ASD and DS, they described the importance of developing a culture and climate of inclusion within the school community. This was demonstrated through discussions of student socialization and building students' awareness of disability, which participants perceived as benefits of inclusion particularly to reduce risks of bullying and social exclusion.

Peer socialization

Many participants appreciated the benefits of inclusive classrooms for fostering peer socialization and friendships among both students with and without disabilities. For example:

It's good to include children with disabilities to study in inclusive class because the important thing is socialization. It is better than having the child with disability alone or with their peer [disabled peer]. But [if] they can socialize with other students with non-disabilities it's a good idea. (GE # 2)

It's good that we have students with disabilities studying with the students [without disabilities] and they have friends and they can play together. (GE #5)

Some GE teachers employed a "peer learning system" within their classrooms as an inclusive teaching strategy, but more so as a means for fostering socialization:

Another one [teaching strategy] is having friend who is next to him [disabled child] to help. It's like if he didn't understand what the teacher said, but the person next to him can explain what the teacher asks [students] to do. (GE #10)

When I [am] doing group reading, I ask [non-disabled children] in the class to sit next to child with disability and to support them to follow. (GE #1)

Likewise, SE/D teacher #3 highlighted friendships between students with and without disabilities as extending beyond the classroom:

Child with high capacity, we ask them when they are finished their task they can help their friend to finish....teach the children how to help each other, the peer system, to support the other students. So if they go out [of the school] or they are here [in the school] they can help their friend.

Some GE teachers also recognized potential for inclusion to ameliorate instances of school bullying and discrimination through cultivating friendships. One GE teacher (#4) reported, "It's [inclusion] good for socialization...they [students with and without disabilities] feel closer...sometimes they make fun of the child but if they became their friends, it will be better." Similarly, GE teacher (#1) explained her experience of inclusive education with one child, "[When she was] first referred to inclusive class, some regular students didn't play or don't want socialize [with her]....But for now that's OK as they play together [now]."

The only opportunities for this type of socialization, however, were during recess and story-time:

They have friends. For physically disabled students, they can join activities. Students with autism and Down Syndrome have friends in the normal class [general education class], because we have break time at the same time....after one in classes they play with their friends, because break time for the integrated class [segregated class] and the normal class is at the same time. So they can go outside and play. (GE #8)

Sometimes at the story lesson, the teacher tells a story and students with disabilities and non-disabilities come to listen and answer questions....everyone go to the library and then they come to read the story....Students in the regular class they come to read the story, tell a story to students with disabilities. (SE/D #3)

Accordingly, participants perceived inclusive classrooms as valuable for developing friendships, serving as means of reducing forms of stigmatization and strengthening sense of belonging within the school community.

Building student awareness of disability.

Participants described some form of disability awareness within their classroom and school environment. They explained for example, disability school events organized by an NGO,

We have activities like Child Day and Child Rights Day event. Also in December we organize [an event] for International Person with Disability Day. All the students come together and we have fun activities. The NGO organizes the event with the school, and all the students and parents come to join the event. (GE # 6)

One GE teacher (#10) also highlighted integrating discussions of disability into lesson plans, "In the normal class [general education class] the teacher also teaches the students, they integrate those things [disability awareness] into the lesson. So the normal student [i.e., those without disabilities], they see what they need to do when they meet student with disabilities."

In efforts to ameliorate discrimination, another GE teacher (# 2) reported her willingness to include children with disabilities in her classroom, not only for learning but also for sharing personal disability experiences:

[We] will accept because also want students with disability to come and study. But maybe we can ask them to come to the front and tell the other students about discrimination.

One SE/D teacher (#7) explained students without disabilities lack of knowledge as a reason for bullying students with disabilities; she shared the experiences of a girl with DS attending an inclusive classroom:

In grade 1 I refer Down Syndrome girl to study in grade 1 primary class. The other students with no disability, they like talk something about her...make fun of her. And sometimes she miss [absent] from the class...she is embarrassed to come to class. I talk with the staff and need to meet with the teacher to do something with the student. It's her first year [in general education class]....the students without disability they don't know, so takes a long time [to accept disabled child]....it's like the children they don't know, so they just call the bad name.

Teachers' efforts in raising consciousness and understandings of disability, along with fostering peer socialization, served as a means of reducing disability stigma, cultivating a culture of inclusion and sense of belonging.

Enhancing Inclusive Learning and Participation

Participants described ways in which they supported the inclusion process for young people with disabilities, enhancing learning and participation for ASD and DS students, and shaping overall school belonging. Despite limited experience and education of disability and inclusion, a few GE teachers described classroom adaptations. GE teacher #5 reported,

With [this child] with Down Syndrome, they like to do activities and [have] fun. For the teaching we create teaching materials that have colouring and fun activities, like painting with the colours. To teach them the letters, like Khmer letters, for example the letter A. We do not draw it or write it on the board, but we use the cards with the letter A and they colour it. We play games. So we need to design fun activities for teaching them.

As such, this teacher highlighted the importance of connecting learning to students' interest, whilst engaging them through fun games and activities.

Another GE teacher (#6) emphasized the importance of maintaining routine for young people with ASD and DS, "[We] also have schedule cards so we don't change activities from one day to another. Like in the morning, cleaning the room, washing their hands....for both children with autism and Down Syndrome."

SE/D teachers also reported using of objects and manipulatives during lessons,

...mathematics lesson [give] objects to the child....for the other children mathematics lesson they can [write] with paper with their book, their notebook. But for the child [with ASD and DS] they use object for them to calculate...so [we] add teaching material (SE/D #6)

In explaining her experience with one ASD student, SE/D teacher #1 reported adaptations such as, sitting near the student, providing extra time, breaking down the requested task, and adjusting pace. She indicated, "...sit next to the girl [with ASD] and ask her to read. And only to read short sentence

and slowly. And give more time than the others and the she can finish the task." Similarly, GE teacher #7 indicated offering extra time for physically disabled students, "...with students with physical [disability] for hand writing, I give more time for him to finish the task. He takes much more time than the other students, so we need to give them more time." Both groups of teachers also reported seating arrangements as forms of environmental accommodations for disabled students. Seemingly, many participants presented inclusive opportunities for disabled students, particularly those with ASD and DS, enhancing overall student sense of school belonging. Yet, they also poignantly expressed challenges.

Navigating Dilemmas of Inclusive Education Terrain

Throughout all interviews, challenges of implementing inclusive education emerged, ranging from practical classroom hindrances to communication concerns between teachers. Such predicaments shaped the inclusive process for many participants consequently influencing their capacity to support sense of belonging.

Time limitations and large class sizes

Many GE teachers reported classroom time management as a major limitation to supporting students with NDD. More specifically, they indicated issues of devoting time for students with NDD when coping with large class sizes and curriculum/lesson plan expectations.

...it's hard work, because in one class there are 48-50 students with no disability. And when they add one with disability it makes her spend her time with the disability child. And the curriculum, they [regular students] need to finish the lesson. And if spend much time with the child with disability, so the lesson won't get finished. (GE # 2)

Similar, similar, there are more than 50 students in grade 1 and grade 1 is young children....spends a lot of time to work with children with disabilities. Young children, 5 or 6 years old and 50 students. (GE # 5)

I really need someone to support me, like teacher assistant in the class. I cannot pay more attention to the child [with disabilities] for a long time because I need to teach another

50 students. So, it would be good if someone can help me.
(GE #3)

...the curriculum, we need to reach the goal of the curriculum. But I spend a long time with children with disabilities, so it means that it's difficult for the teacher.
(GE #6)

Takes more time for the lesson plan and implementation [for disabled children]. Sometime at break times, and all the students go out except only disability child. I sit next to the child and encourage him to finish the task, because they take more time than the others. (GE #1)

These teachers highlighted difficulties in maintaining large class sizes and maintaining curricula expectations for the entire classroom when including students with disabilities, primarily resulting from time predicaments (e.g., individualized extra time to work one-on-one, extra time to adapt lesson plans).

Interestingly, SE/D teachers did not perceive large classroom sizes as an issue in providing individualized attention and time with students with disabilities. In explaining the importance of student-teacher ratio, one SE/D teacher contended similar ratios could be applied in the general education classrooms, allowing GE teachers to allocate time in working one-on-one or in small groups with students with disabilities:

The ratio of the students, we can apply in the regular class. For example, some students with disabilities, can work one-by-one, one teacher and one student. And in some cases, one teacher and 3 or 4 students, we divide students according to their individual developmental plan (SE/D #4)

Collaboration and communication

Participants highlighted collaboration and communication between GE and SE/D teachers, and teachers and families, as they moved through the inclusion process to elevate students' sense of belonging. As some SE/D teacher participants facilitated in-house segregated disability classrooms within public schools the researcher inquired about the degree to which these teachers collaborate with GE teachers to adapt and accommodate for students with NDD in the regular classrooms. One SE/D teacher indicated cooperation between the two groups, however, only in early years of schooling,

We have cooperation between the [GE] teacher and [SE/D] teacher. We have cooperation and work together. But when the student comes to grade 2, 3, and 4, there is no technique for the student. Only in grade 1, because it's early education and child's first time in school. (SE/D # 9)

Yet, some in-house SE/D teachers indicated complexities of consistently assisting GE teachers in inclusive classrooms,

It's impossible....the staff [SE/D teachers] cannot stay for the whole day or for a long time. Maybe every two weeks to meet with the public school teacher...once for two weeks. Two times per month just meeting, not support in the class, but just meeting and then provide [GE teacher] with technical support...maybe can meet with the [GE teacher] who is responsible and talk together. (SE/D #8)

After receiving this response, the researcher pushed further trying to understand the hesitation and resistance for in-house SE/D teachers to provide inclusion support in general education classrooms. No participant responded.

Discussion

This paper sheds light onto the experiences of rural Cambodian teachers' efforts to strengthen school sense of belonging for ASD and DS students as they transition toward inclusive education. Participants emphasized the benefits and challenges surrounding inclusive education within rural Cambodia.

Inclusive School Culture within Cambodia – Landscapes of Contradictions

Despite challenges, participants still implemented inclusive pedagogical approaches and established socially inclusive school cultures. They perceived peer socialization and building disability awareness as mainstay ingredients for enhancing the sense of belonging and connection within the school community, and as a means to destabilizing stigma and taboo surrounding disability. Similar to Lindays et al.'s (2013) study, participants advocated for disability awareness to support social inclusion and acceptance of difference within their classroom. Participants recognized the importance of cultivating positive social experiences to establish an inclusive culture. Positive school

climates provide a sense of physical and emotional safety, whereby students feel support, respect, and care in peer and adult relationships (Voight et al., 2015). Participants' description of a peer learning system to support not only learning but also friendship development between students with and without disabilities is an example of establishing a climate of social inclusion. This type of peer system aligns with the "buddy system" employed by some teacher participants in Lindsay's et al. (2014) study, as a means of supporting inclusive learning, as well as social inclusion. Yet, such socialization, as participants expressed, only occurs during recess and /or story-time, suggesting the need to expand opportunities for social inclusion. Researchers suggest strengthening inclusive school culture entails presenting students with possibilities for civic and democratic engagement, contributing to their sense of agency as they co-create an inclusive community of belonging (e.g., school decision-making, participating in building safe and respectful school spaces, etc., Katz & Sokal, 2016; Voight et al., 2015). However, these democratic ideals contradict Cambodia's historically elitist culture (Kalyanpur, 2014); this tension is also reported throughout Cambodia's neighbouring country, Thailand, whereby concepts of universal design contradict the Thai culture and school system (Bualar, 2016). Moreover, numerous studies examining inclusive education in Southeast Asia demonstrate developing an inclusive school climate is difficult without proper policy implementation, para-professional training, and positive attitudes and beliefs about disability (Bualar, 2016; Hosshan et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2014; Poon et al., 2014).

Presently, Cambodian organizations serving children with ASD and DS mostly saturate urban areas of the country, despite a majority of the population residing in rural countryside with limited access to healthcare and educational services (Moreira, 2011). From her study examining disability within Cambodia, including ASD, Burkhardt (2014) found a majority of participants (i.e., teachers, NGO stakeholders, government officials, Buddhist nuns, and school directors) reported young people with NDD experience exclusion from public schools due to fear, discrimination, embarrassment, and inadequate teacher training. Although Khmer words, such as *Pikar*, describing overall disability do not convey fundamentally negative understandings, those describing NDD more likely reflect derogatory meanings, particularly within rural Cambodia (e.g., evil spirits caused the disability, poor Karma, mad pig, etc.) (Moreira, 2011). Those with NDD often experience segregation, exclusion, and discrimination due to societal negative attitudes associated with this particular group of disabilities within Cambodia (Moreira, 2011). As she explained, "...individuals with intellectual disabilities were and continue to be

denied full acceptance in society and recognized as full citizens because...[of challenges to] fulfill their responsibilities within Cambodian society" (e.g., getting married, Moreira, p. 101-102).

Individuals with disabilities living in developing countries, including those in the global South, experience discrimination, stigma, and frequent exclusion from mainstream education (Baffoe, 2013; Stienstra, 2015). Stienstra (2015) emphasizes a sense of “invisibility” (p. 632) among children with disabilities in the global South; in rural developing countries this invisibility intensifies with intersections of poverty, marginalization, and abandonment, impacting school belonging and inclusion. Furthermore, children with disabilities in these contexts are often not enrolled in mainstream schools or drop-out due to risks of bullying, teasing, and name calling, also victimizing families as they become isolated through their child’s schooling experiences (Ahmad, 2015; Geda et al., 2016). In examining bullying and discrimination in mainstream vs. special education schools, the international research is inconsistent, as some studies suggest such experiences increase in mainstream schools (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Koller et al., 2018), while others indicate bullying experiences occur in special education schools (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Wei et al., 2016).

With the support of various NGO's there are some integration classrooms within public schools for young people with NDD (i.e., segregated classrooms for students with disabilities located on public school premises), allowing socialization among students without disabilities during certain activities (e.g., recess) (Carter, 2009). However, differing from inclusive classrooms, whereby students with disabilities participate alongside peers without disabilities in the same classroom for learning and teaching (teachers provide instructional/programming adaptations and environmental accommodations), integrated classrooms serve as segregated learning spaces to build skills in preparation for inclusive classrooms. Many Cambodian integrated classrooms for students with NDD primarily focus on building life-skills knowledge, rather than educational knowledge as outlined in the curriculum (Carter, 2009); contradicting government policies and international treaties promoting inclusive education.

Inclusive Education and Teacher Complexities in rural Southeast Asian Contexts.

Perhaps, this speaks to challenges of teacher professional development for effective strategies in modifying/adapting curricula and re-arranging environmental conditions supporting inclusive education. There is extensive Southeast Asian research highlighting lack of teacher education, for both in-service and pre-service general education teachers working with disabilities and inclusion, which logically influences teachers' confidence and competency (Sheehy & Budiyanto, 2014; Haq & Mundia, 2012; Hosshan et al., 2020; Yeo et al., 2016). Specifically, within rural Cambodia, Moreira (2011) found that general education teachers felt unprepared to adapt curriculum/teaching programs and provide the necessary accommodations to support students with disabilities in regular classrooms, particularly those with NDD. Additionally, some teachers reported a sense of unwillingness to educate students with NDD due to the low status attributed to these young people and their families. Educational access for young people with NDD within public schools, including inclusive classrooms, is a constant challenge for many families (Moreira, 2011). However, through the assistance of NGOs, Community Based Rehabilitative centres (CBR), IDAs, and other government programs, these young people may receive education in a segregated learning environment with access to rehabilitative services.

GE teacher participants articulated challenges of large class sizes and time management. Other studies examining inclusive education in developing countries highlight demands of additional burden and workload, limited time, and large class size (Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010; Kalyanpur, 2011; Malak, 2013a, 2013b; Moreira, 2011). Although such challenges are not unique to rural developing contexts, the lack of teacher preparation and education surrounding disability and inclusion may exacerbate matters of workload and burden, in addition to attitudes and beliefs toward disabled children. Currently, Cambodian teachers receive insufficient and brief inclusive education and disability courses (Arnold, 2015; Kalyanpur, 2011, 2014; Kim & Rouse, 2011; Sisk & Suchanek, 2015), and teachers level of competency is reported as the number one barrier to inclusive education in Cambodia (Siska & Suchanek, 2015). Within this study there were vast differences between GE teachers and SE/D's level of preparedness and efficacy; SE/D teachers did not indicate any lack of teacher preparation for working with ASD and DS young people, and providing inclusive education. The model of disability education for Cambodia's school system is to provide greater education/learning to government staff (SE/D teachers). These teachers are then assigned to work in segregated classrooms in public schools. Congruent with Bines and Lei's (2011) study, participants highlighted the

impact of Cambodia's school “clusters” whereby GE teachers receive contributions from SE/D specialists and other forms of professional development.

Yet, only 3 out of 10 GE teachers received further professional development, and this was on a one-time basis for a one day workshop. Professional development enhance teachers' sense of personal efficacy in supporting inclusion, influencing their beliefs and subsequently impacting their willingness to embrace inclusion philosophies and processes (Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010; Engstrand & Roll-Pettersson, 2012; Malak, 2013a; Soodak et al., 1998). Uncertainty regarding inclusion may lead to confusion and unclarity regarding teachers' roles in supporting inclusion in global South countries, further adding tensions (Bualar, 2016; Haq & Mundia, 2012; Hosshan et al., 2020; Kamenopoulou, 2018; Poon et al., 2014). Although participants maintained positive conceptualizations of disability and perceived benefits of inclusive education, additional professional learning may continue building upon these attitudes (Engstrand & Roll-Pettersson, 2012), which is especially beneficial for teachers in Southeast Asian countries (Bualar, 2016; Carter, 2009; Hosshan et al., 2020; Kim & Rouse, 2011; Phin, 2014; Poon et al., 2014; Siska & Suchanek, 2015). In developing worlds, field practicum also significantly supports teachers' capacity and confidence in working with students with disabilities, particularly if the practicum is effectively designed to suit student-teacher contexts (Bortoli et al., 2009; Malak, 2013a, 2013b; Pearce, 2009).

Furthermore, the findings highlighted resistance among SE/D teachers toward working in general education classrooms. Although some GE and SE/D teachers reported adequate collaboration there was a disconnect. Despite SE/D teachers' awareness, knowledge, and experience in working with ASD and DS young people, there was hesitation in supporting GE teachers, beyond a few monthly meetings. Much of the inclusive education research emphasize cooperation and communication between school stake-holders as critical components to successful and sustainable inclusive education (Frankel et al., 2010; Grimes et al., 2011; Katz & Sokal, 2016; Lindsay et al., 2014; Malak, 2013a, 2013b). Developing collaborative partnerships amongst this group of teachers may enhance inclusive pedagogy and environments, positively fostering school belonging. Whilst teamwork among GE and SE/D teachers propel inclusive environments, maintaining consistent collaboration presents many challenges for realistic implementation (e.g., ad-hoc meeting times, busy

schedules, time constraints, etc.) (Mulholland & O' Connor, 2016), and these challenges arguably heighten within rural developing world contexts.

Conclusion

Inclusive education is complexly webbed within the Cambodian government and international donors (Kalyanpur, 2011, 2014; Siska & Suchanek, 2015). The government recognizes the significance of developing comprehensive teacher learning and professional development, however, international donors and NGOs organize and conduct a majority of these short-term courses (Carter, 2009). Similar to other developing countries, Cambodia heavily relies on financial support from international donors; this government-donor relationship often leads to implementing initiatives misaligning with the country's priorities (Kalyanpur, 2011). For example, rather than employ low-cost country-based resources to provide training, donors import costly equipment which becomes unattainable for governments to sustain long-term; consequently, training is provided for small groups and in one area of the country without extending to others across the country (Kalyanpur, 2011). Or, if NGOs successfully implement particular frameworks (e.g., child-friendly schools), donors and governments espouse the approach nationally without considering the amount of required financial capital and/or human resource investment (Kalyanpur, 2011). Resulting from the inefficient relationship between donors, government, and NGO's, the current system struggles to effectively support teacher preparation for inclusive education. To better link stakeholders they may consider seeking balance among donor policies and priorities and the local contexts, adjusting for the incongruence between Western/European inclusive ideals within post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia (Kalyanpur, 2011, 2014). Additionally, providing support and education at the community grassroots level may balance the predominantly top-down government approach to inclusive education (Kalyanpur, 2011).

This study conveys understandings of a small sample of teachers working to support inclusion for students with NDD in Cambodia. The findings support past studies examining international inclusive education, whilst also raising questions regarding whether inclusion truly serves Cambodian students with NDD. For example, re-thinking the paradox of aligning rights-based ideologies and inclusive principles with traditionally collectivist, elitist, and hierarchal societies like Cambodia, particularly when left heavily under resourced following the Khmer Rouge. Future research may continue examining whether segregated inclusion is in the best interest of

Cambodian young people with NDD. Although inclusion is a main goal for supporting sense of belonging, participants expressed challenges in this particular context. More specifically, limited training, education, and experience with disability, as well as ineffective collaboration between GE and SE/D teachers. Currently, segregated classrooms provide care and educational opportunities for children with ASD and DS, and simultaneously both GE and SE/D teachers are fostering some level of sense of belonging, as best possible given their circumstances. With collaborative spirits between GE and SE/D teachers, segregated classrooms may serve as an intermediate basis for supporting teachers in disability and inclusion learning, fostering an inclusive climate, and enriching student learning and participation.

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