

Educating all in Laos: Identifying existing inclusive education resources related to children with disabilities

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Abstract

The idea of inclusive education was introduced to the Lao education system a few decades ago. In 2011, the Lao government passed legislation named the National Policy on Inclusive Education to ensure the right to equitable access to quality education for all people in society. This paper provides information on resources about inclusive education, particularly those including children with disabilities that are available and accessible in Lao. In addition, how inclusive education for children with disabilities has been implemented by relevant partners is discussed. The writer used a literature survey of previous studies, journals, books, legislation, and reports to discuss the existing inclusive education resources in Laos. Some of the information collected regarding inclusive education with a focus on disability inclusion was available in both Laotian and English. These documents are discussed under the headings of government related policies on inclusive education for children with disabilities, demonstration projects implemented by partner organizations, online resources that can be used by inclusive education practitioners, and organizations of people with disabilities that support implementation of inclusive education. Based on the literature survey, the writer suggests that (i) specific policies on inclusion of children with disabilities should be made by the relevant authorities, (ii) all pre-service and in-service teachers should receive training on inclusive education for children with disabilities (iii) existing resources should be promoted and disseminated in ways that all people can gain access to, (iv) relevant communities should work together to build stronger partnerships and create the same value of fully including children with disabilities and (v) local community members should be involved in demonstration projects.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Children with Disabilities, Disability Resources, Laos*

1. Introduction

Education is considered the fundamental component for citizens to contribute to their own country's development. Like many other countries, the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) has emphasized education as an important element in national socio-economic and human resources development. Prioritizing equal education opportunity for all children, the government of Lao PDR issued decree no. 509/PM dated December 07, 2010, to approve and promulgate a national policy on inclusive education

No. 1170/MOES. This policy had been transferred and adopted in the national education development plan 2011-2015. All these provide for quality education for all, and reduce and eliminate access to learning gaps among disadvantaged groups, especially women, minority group members, children with disabilities and those with social-economic disadvantage (MOES, 2011).

Inclusive Education (IE) is the provision of quality and equal education for all children at all levels, regardless of their ethnicity, language, religion, gender, age, disability and socio-economic

status, to participate in school regularly and progressively. Inclusion at school is about making changes which require real action so that all children with different backgrounds and abilities can learn and succeed. This change is important because it not only benefits children with special needs, but also all children, as well as parents, teachers, administrators and everyone in the community working with schools (UNESCO, 2011).

Adopting an inclusive education policy brings positive benefits to society. These benefits are:

(1) Children become more confident, learn how to be independent both within and outside the school, understand and use what they learned in real life, have fun being with others who are different, adapt themselves and learn to value others, and accept everyone as being equally special.

(2) Teachers have the opportunity to learn new strategies to teach children, are able to find ways to overcome the challenges, and have the opportunity to explore and exchange ideas with others both inside and outside the school. In addition, teachers are supported and praised by their communities.

(3) Parents are involved in helping their children learn, feel valued, learn how to solve problems and learn to work with others in the community.

(4) Communities feel proud when all children go to school, social problems are reduced, community members contribute more in schools, and school-community relations improve (UNESCO, 2011).

Although the Lao inclusive education policy was adopted and has been promulgated since 2011, most schools have not yet implemented this policy, and many children with disabilities are not in schools. Among the population aged 5+, there are 160,881 people who have a disability, and the overall prevalence of disabilities in Lao PDR is 2.77 percent (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). According to the Education Development Implementation Plan for Academic Year 2019-2020, the total number of children with disabilities (deaf, hard of hearing and unable to speak) enrolled in special schools was 169, and nine students were studying different majors at the National University of Laos. There were only four students with visual impairments, however, who attended the inclusive Phaiwat School in the capital of Vientiane (MOES, 2020). The report also

states that the enrolment rate of school-aged children from disadvantaged groups, especially girls, ethnic minority children and children with disabilities in remote rural areas, is very low. Furthermore, children with minor and severe disabilities are the groups least likely to participate in school.

Because of the significance of inclusive education and the problems mentioned, the researcher was eager to determine what inclusive education resources, especially with a focus on inclusion of children with disabilities, were available in Laos. In addition, as an inclusive educator, the researcher has received funding through an Australian Volunteers Impact Grant to implement Inclusion Role Model Training for 50 young student teachers at the Faculty of Education, Souphanouvong University, LuangPrabang, Laos, during the period from October 2021 to March 2022.

Therefore, the results of this inclusive education resource survey will make a crucial contribution to the preparation of training materials, resource sharing and provision of future self-study resources. Ultimately, this paper will help the writer and others understand and learn about inclusive education in deep and practical ways.

2. Materials and Methods

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

(1) What inclusive education resources related to including children with disabilities in mainstream schools are available and accessible in Lao?

(2) How has inclusive education for children with disabilities been demonstrated by local government and partner organizations in Laos?

This study was conducted as a literature survey to find information related to inclusive education, particularly for children with disabilities, that was available online. The researcher used the search engine Google to obtain information from relevant previous studies, journals, guidebooks, project activity reports and organization activities. The search terms used were: Laos + 'inclusive education' and Laos + children + disabilities.

The researcher also developed criteria relevant to the research questions to select information from the literature survey for inclusion in the results below. These criteria were: (1) Government-related policies on inclusive education for children with disabilities, (2) Demonstration projects implemented by partner organizations, (3)

Published resources that can be used by inclusive education practitioners and (4) Organizations of people with disabilities.

3. Results

The researcher was able to identify a range of potentially useful resources by undertaking these online searches, and the findings are discussed below under the four categories mentioned as criteria above. The findings summarize the available inclusive education resources that support children with disabilities in Laos to have a better education and other opportunities in society. Links to the resources discussed are included in this paper in section 8. References.

3.1 Government-Related Policies on Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities

In 2011, the National Policy on Inclusive Education was released to ensure that all Laotians have access to education of good quality and that educational goals are achievable for all children. This policy consists of nine strategies with a completed action plan that the MOES took the leading role in collaboration with relevant sectors. The details of the strategies are: [1] *raising awareness*., [2] *policy for education fee*, [3] *school expansion and transition*, [4] *curricular reform*, [5] *sustainability*, [6] *infrastructure and assistive technology*, [7] *job recruitment*, [8] *collaboration* and [9] *investment in education*.

To achieve the proposed goals, the key targets of the national policy on IE were as follows:

- Ensure that community-based school readiness programs, daycare, pre-primary education, and pre-primary attached classes are available to 39 percent of children aged 3-5, particularly females from low-income ethnic groups and children with disabilities.
- Achieving gender parity by 2015 with a primary net enrolment rate (NER) of 98 percent, a primary net intake rate of 100 percent, and a primary net survival rate of 95 percent, achieving a gross enrolment rate of 75 percent in lower and upper secondary schools, increasing access to higher education and teacher education with 50% of students being women and 20% from low-income families, and increasing the literacy rate for women aged 15 to 40 years old.
- By 2015, ensure that all principles of inclusive education, including human rights, child

rights, gender equality, ethnic equality, and equal opportunity for people with disabilities, are mainstreamed into all aspects and levels of the educational system, including human resource development, recruitment and promotion policies, curriculum development, teaching-learning materials, school management, and classroom practices.

- At least 12% of schools in each province, at all levels and in all fields, will be equipped with the necessary resources to provide quality education to diverse learners, including females, ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and people in socioeconomic distress, and at least 30% of students with minor disabilities must be enrolled in grades 1-9 by 2015. (MOES, 2011).

3.2 Demonstration Projects Implemented by the Partner Organizations

Several disability-inclusive education programs have been demonstrated in targeted local community schools. These projects were approved by the Lao Ministry of Education and Sports and conducted by International Non-profit Organizations (INGOs). The overall objective of the projects was to provide an example to the community of how to run an inclusive school for children with disabilities. The lessons learnt from these projects are crucial case studies that are contributing to developing future disabilities inclusion in Laos.

3.2.1 The BEQUAL NGO Consortium (BNC) project

The goal of the project was to expand access to and participation in primary schools. ChildFund, Plan International, Save the Children, and World Vision were all part of the consortium. From August 2017 to September 2018, 22 communities in the district of Xaybouathong, Khammouane province, participated in initiatives to support inclusive education for children with disabilities. The BNC project's disability inclusion activities comprised the following components:

Disability sensitisation and identification of children with disabilities: Events aimed at improving awareness and understanding among teachers and community members of disability and the right to education (both in and out of school).

Medical screening and referral for treatment, assistive devices, support: Children with disabilities, or those suspected of having disabilities, are

screened in a village-based medical screening and referral system to determine whether they require treatment, assistive devices, or other intervention.

Support for Inclusive Education and Individual Education Plans (IEPs): The curriculum and tools used during the training were developed by Catholic Relief Services during the Right to Learn project in Xaybouathong (see 3.2.5). Type of disabilities, principle of inclusive education, teaching methods and aids for children with disabilities were among the topics covered.

The project also delivered:

- Disability rights and equality training for 22 communities
- Mapping of children with disabilities
- Medical screening of children with possible disabilities (mobile clinics)
- Teacher training on the use of IEPs and teaching aids for inclusive education
- Teacher training on inclusive education; identification of students needing IEPs in 22 schools
- Medical treatment, assistive devices, and rehabilitation for children with disabilities
- Coaching for teachers and parents of children with disabilities or special learning needs (World Vision, 2018).

3.2.2 TEAM Laos Project

The Training, Economic Empowerment, Assistive Technology, Medical Rehabilitation (TEAM) project was funded by USAID from January 2014 to June 2017. The TEAM worked to achieve and retain maximal independence for people with disabilities in order for them to engage completely and equally in all aspects of life. The following activities were achieved:

(1) 100 medical and rehabilitation service personnel, including doctors, nurses, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and wheelchair technicians, were trained.

(2) Economic empowerment efforts gave benefits to 400 people with disabilities and their families (income generation, loans, and job placement).

(3) Assistive technology was provided to 800 people with disabilities for mobility, ADL, communication, education, and sports.

(4) Medical and physical rehabilitation therapy had a direct impact on the rehabilitation outcomes of 1200 people with disabilities.

Sub-grantees including Association for Aid and Relief Japan, Association for Autism, Handicap International, Catholic Relief Services, Lao Disabled People's Association, Lao Disabled Women's Development Centre, Quality of Life Association, Lao Friends Hospital for Children, Cooperative Orthotic & Prosthetic Enterprise, Center of Medical Rehabilitation, Lao Association of the Blind, Aid Children with Disabilities Association, Asian Development with Disabled Persons (ADDP Japan), the Faculty of Medical Technology at the University of Health Sciences and the Inclusive Education Centre worked together to improve the overall impact of the initiatives.

The project website contains extensive information about the project, as well as a range of useful resources (Team Laos, 2017).

3.2.3 Let's Include All Project

In 2015, a group of instructors and students at Souphanouvong University's Faculty of Education launched "Let's Include All" to advocate for inclusive education. Their first goal was to increase awareness of inclusive education for children with disabilities, as well as the barriers they encounter in receiving the same education as their classmates. The group created and managed the Let's Include All Facebook page, which has received a growing response with each entry.

The group's second objective was to provide role model training, and they have conducted extensive and practical teaching and skilling of trainee teachers over the three to four years that they study at the university. The expectation is that they will become effective ambassadors who can promote and implement changes in their own schools and communities in the near future (Let's Include All, 2017).

3.2.4 CRS and University of Oregon Inclusive Education Project

Learning and Engaging All in Primary School (LEAPS) was a collaboration between CRS and the University of Oregon. LEAPS included training of administrators in management of Inclusive Education (IE), it also included creation of a dual-language IE resources website and online learning modules.

Five educators from the University of Oregon visited Laos in June 2015 to provide follow-up training and advice to educators. In Vientiane and Savannakhet, they visited with Ministry of

Education and Sports personnel as well as local educators. The emphasis was on improving literacy skills in children with minor disabilities, learning about autism, and supporting educators in including all children with disabilities into regular education programs.

In February 2016, a group of thirteen Laotian educators, primarily teachers, district education bureau officials, and CRS staff, traveled to the University of Oregon for a two-week intensive professional development workshop geared toward trainers and direct service providers. The program addressed subjects ranging from a fundamental overview of inclusive education to classroom differentiations, with a specific focus on assisting children with autism in collaboration with their families (University of Oregon, 2015).

3.2.5 Right to Learn Project by Catholic Relief Services (CRS)

CRS carried out the two-year Right to Learn initiative, which began in 2013 and ended in 2015, with funding from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The primary goals of the project were to strengthen the Ministry of Education and Sports' capacity and to give training to school workers and municipal officials. The CRS Right to Learn Project carried out the following actions to meet its goal:

Provision of Technical Assistance (TA): The TA team created technical resources to support the activities of the Right to learn initiative and transferred technical knowledge to the Inclusive Education Center (IEC). Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) for Village Education Development Committees (VEDCs) and Individual Education Plans (IEPs), as well as other teaching methods for children with disabilities, were the focus of two specific trainings. These have significantly increased the resources available to MOES to support their work on school and community capacity building at the local level.

Capacity Development for Primary School Teachers and School Principals: The CRS and its partners provided training to school teachers and principals in three modules: General IE Theory, Inclusive Education Management (IEM) for Administrators, and IEP and Teaching Methods for Children with Disabilities.

Local Communities and Inclusive Village Development: This initiative required close

collaboration among VEDC members, teachers, and parents to discuss and provide detailed information on disability awareness, behavior improvement, supportive families, and participation of disabled children in school and in the village. Furthermore, the project supplied assistive equipment to disabled children, making their lives easier.

Access to Specialized Medical and Rehabilitation Services for Disabled Children: Community mapping was carried out in 40 villages to determine which children needed assistance. As a result, 69 children were given 72 assistance devices. CRS also aided in the referral and access to surgery in provincial and national hospitals.

The Right to Learn project has succeeded, as evidenced by the 66 percent enrolment rate of students with impairments in the targeted villages. However, the project facilitators suggested that specific areas of concentration should be kept, and an innovative strategy should be introduced to ensure that children with impairments achieve long-term success in school (CRS, 2015).

3.2.6 Save the Children Laos Inclusive Education Project

The Inclusive Education Project (IE Project) of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) began in 1993 and ended in 2009. The project's goal was to encourage all children to attend school, with a special emphasis on disabled children. It worked to transform the education system by implementing child-centered teaching and learning practices.

In 1992, the capital city of Laos, Vientiane, established a special school for blind and deaf students. This was viewed as a significant step toward putting the Convention on the Rights of the Child into effect (UN General Assembly, 1989). The project was developed in three stages, from 1995 to 1999, 2000 to 2004, and 2005 to 2008.

The 539 schools included pre-school, primary and secondary schools, as well as three special schools, and they were spread over all 141 districts in each of the country's 17 provinces. By 2008, approximately 3000 disabled children were reportedly being schooled alongside their peers (Grimes, Sayarath, & Outhaithany, 2011).

The prevailing teaching pedagogy in 1993 was based on traditional practices that included high levels of rote learning and blackboard copying. Therefore, the project started focusing on training and supporting teachers in order to increase

educational quality by bringing child-centered learning approaches to learning, which included:

- (1) a variety of activities to be carried out during the lesson
- (2) increased use of resources
- (3) a variety of student grouping techniques
- (4) diverse questioning strategies and
- (5) The creation of lessons that were relevant to real life or the learner's personal experiences.

This approach became known as the IE 5 Point Star (Grimes, Sayarath, & Outhaithany, 2011). However, many teachers were hesitant to use a wide range of activities.

3.3 Published Resources that Can be Used by Inclusive Education Practitioners

There are many disabilities inclusion materials that have been translated from English originals to the Lao language. These published resources serve as handbooks for practitioners and stakeholders in developing disability inclusive education programs. Available resources cover understanding disability-inclusive education, creating an inclusive learning classroom, curriculum differentiation in the classroom and supporting children with different disabilities.

3.3.1 Inclusive Education Teacher Training Handbook

This training handbook was created in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), World Education, USAID, and Advancing Partners and Communities (APC) in 2016 to be used during training on teaching methods and Individual Education Plans (IEP) for the inclusion of students with disabilities. The program aimed to improve primary school teachers' ability to support children with disabilities in the classroom. The training was aimed to demonstrate particular methods for altering and adapting classroom activities, as well as generating and utilising teaching aids made from local materials, in order to allow students with disabilities to participate fully and successfully in their learning. The expected outcomes for the training were for participants to:

- Learn about Inclusive Education, Inclusive Learning Friendly Environments (ILFE), and diverse teaching methods for children with disabilities.
- Have a positive attitude in order to assist in meeting the learning requirements of all

children, particularly those with disabilities, and to enable their full inclusion in school life.

- Gain a better understanding of the various sorts of impairments and barriers that affect participation and learning.
- Understand various communication approaches, build skills to interact successfully with all children, and provide help to children with disabilities who have difficulty communicating in the classroom.
- Increase their understanding of "Inclusive Physical Education" and their ability to customize PE exercises for children with disabilities.
- Develop abilities in the creation and application of reading, writing, and mathematics teaching aids.
- Understand the goal of an IEP for students with disabilities and gain skills in drafting, monitoring, and assessing IEPs.
- Recognize the necessity of communication and collaboration with parents/caregivers when designing and implementing an IEP.
- Develop their capacities to share disability information with students, parents/caregivers, and the community in order to support students with disabilities (MOES, 2016).

3.3.2 UNESCO Inclusive Education Booklets

The original UNESCO IE toolkit in English has been adapted to the Lao context, translated into Lao and published in 2011 by the Inclusive Education Center, the Ministry of Education and Sports, Lao PDR, with support from UNESCO Bangkok. There are 4 booklets in Lao.

Booklet 1: *Becoming an Inclusive Learning Friendly Environment* defines an ILFE and its benefits for teachers, students, parents, and communities. It also assists educators in identifying areas where a school is already inclusive and learning-friendly, as well as places where improvements are needed. It offers suggestions for how to prepare for these improvements, as well as how to track and assess progress.

Booklet 2: *Creating Inclusive Learning Friendly Classrooms* explains how the concept of learning has evolved over time as classes have become more child-centered. It includes skills and ideas for dealing with children from a variety of

backgrounds and abilities, as well as for making learning relevant for all.

Booklet 3: *Creating a Healthy and Protective ILFE* assists educators in starting to develop an effective school health and safety component. It discusses efforts to enroll all children in school.

Booklet 4: *Positive Discipline in the Inclusive Learning-Friendly Classroom* explains how to use positive discipline methods in an inclusive, learning-friendly classroom, as well as how to foster positive student-teacher relationship and create supportive learning environments.

These booklets are now used as foundation resources to develop training materials for in-service teacher trainings (UNESCO, 2011).

3.3.3 Hesperian Health Guides

Hesperian is collaborating with volunteers to establish a single location where individuals may get community health guides and other resources in Lao. Several Hesperian works, including the following, have been translated into Lao.

Helping Children Who Are Deaf includes information, explanations, suggestions, examples, and ideas to assist in responding to the needs of the entire child in a flexible and creative manner. The topics covered include hearing difficulties and communication, the importance of early intervention for children who cannot hear well, language teaching guidelines, basic communication skills, assessing what a child can hear, listening skills, choosing and learning a language, learning to use a sign language, learning to use a spoken language, social skills, working together to help deaf children, education, preventing child sexual abuse, and support for parents and caregivers.

A Health Handbook for Women with Disabilities provides basic information to assist women with disabilities and their caregivers in staying healthy. Disability and the community, organizing for disability-friendly health care, mental health, understanding and caring for the body, health exams, sexuality, sexual health and preventing sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS, family planning, pregnancy, labor and birth, caring for a baby, growing older with a disability, abuse and violence, self-defense, and caregiver support are among the topics covered.

Helping Children Who Are Blind offers information to assist caregivers and parents to expand knowledge about blindness and vision

disorders. It covers topics on how parents can help their child, general guidelines for learning activities, finding out what a child can see, activities for young babies from birth to 6 months, communication, thinking skills, teaching everyday activities, safety, movement, helping a child know where they are (orientation), preventing sexual abuse, becoming part of the community, getting ready for child-care and school, support for parents and caregivers, why children lose their vision and what can be done, and support as a child gets older (Hesperian Health Guides, 2021).

3.4 Organizations of People with Disabilities

Many organizations are known as associations for people with disabilities. These organizations were initiated to raise awareness and advocate for the rights, as well as to support the inclusion, of people with disabilities in society. In addition, these organizations present different abilities that people with disabilities can do and thus contribute to the development of their communities and country.

3.4.1 Lao Disabled People's Association

The Lao Disabled People's Association (LDPA) was established in 2001 as a membership-based organization for people with disabilities. The LDPA is one of Lao PDR's few officially recognized non-profit organizations. It has about 11,000 members and works to represent the interests of all disabled persons. The following are some of the activities in which the LDPA has been engaged and in which people with disabilities can participate:

Supporting the UNCRPD and the Lao Disability Decree: The LDPA assists the government in implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which was signed in 2009, and the Lao government's Decree on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was introduced in 2014. The LDPA is represented on the National Policy on Disability drafting team.

Raising disability rights and equality awareness: Qualified and experienced trainers educate community groups and students in rural and urban regions, government and INGO workers, and media about disability rights and equality. LDPA trained 1,023 disabled and non-disabled people in three provinces in 2015-2016.

Supporting independent living: The LDPA has collaborated with several partners to provide livelihood opportunities:

- With Handicap International from 2011 to 2014, supporting 147 people.
- With Association for Aid and Relief (AAR) from 2014 to 2016, supporting 120 people.
- With World Education from 2015 to 2016, supporting 70 people.

LDPA improves members' employment prospects by collaborating with partners to provide job-readiness training, job placement, and inclusion forums with companies and government.

Providing assistance to people with intellectual disabilities: The Intellectual Disability Unit (IDU), founded in 2008 with the support of Caritas Australia and World Education, empowers the community to improve the quality of life of children with intellectual disabilities and learning difficulties by teaching social and vocational skills. Children with intellectual disability and cerebral palsy are rehabilitated at the IDU. In Laos, this is the only service of its kind, and there is a significant and growing unmet need.

Opening opportunities to participate in sport: Sport promotes social inclusion as well as physical and mental strength. The LDPA aided the growth of wheelchair basketball in Laos by collaborating with Asian Development with the Disabled Persons (ADDP) and Association for Aid and Relief (AAR) Japan.

Building capacity in provincial branches: In 11 provincial offices, the LDPA plays a key role in developing the leadership and organizational ability of its members. The activities of the provincial branches are aimed at increasing human rights awareness and providing information about services accessible to people with disabilities (LDPA, 2015).

3.4.2 Lao Disabled Women Development Center

The Lao Disabled Women Development Center is based in Vientiane, Laos. Its two main goals are to provide realistic opportunities for persons with disabilities and promote awareness of disabled women. The Centre also aims to promote understanding and acceptance of individuals with disabilities in mainstream society. The Lao Disabled Women Development Center (LDWDC) carries out the following activities:

Skills Training: LDWDC trains women with disabilities the skills they need to be self-sufficient. Sewing and embroidery instruction is an important part of the program because it is a highly valued skill in Laos. Students will also learn the principles

of weaving, papermaking, and the production of recycled paper items.

Sign Language and Interpreter Training: The 2005 National Census identified 18,790 Laotians as deaf and hard of hearing (D&HH), while the true figure is likely to be far higher. In Lao PDR, however, there are extremely few professional sign language interpreters. As a result, sign language interpreters are unavailable in health, legal, and educational settings, posing a huge societal obstacle. The program's purpose is to expand both the number of persons who can communicate in sign language and the number of qualified sign language interpreters.

Open Center for Visitors: As the center is totally funded by contributions, it gives public tours to visitors in order to help LDWDC continue to support the disabled in Laos. An excursion providing a unique viewpoint on Lao life, a handicraft instruction, lunch (traditional cuisines), and a Baci ceremony providing a traditional blessing ritual are all included in the tour packages (LDWDC, 2015).

3.4.3 Special Education Schools

Laos has three special education schools. The first, known as the National Rehabilitation Center, is located in Vientiane and serves as a model for the other two special schools. This school's mission is to support children with special needs throughout the country, with a focus on the middle provinces. The Savannakhet Special Education School was founded to serve children with special needs in the southern provinces, whereas the LuangPrabang Special Education School was founded to serve children in the northern provinces. These schools provide basic and secondary education to deaf and blind children.

Because Laos lacked a competent special education teacher training program, the challenges were significant when the government launched the special education program. The National Rehabilitation Center was founded under the Ministry of Health's supervision, and nurses served as teachers at the time. The nurses were trained in Thailand, where the language is comparable to that of Laos. Thai sign language was then converted to Lao and gradually enhanced as a result of continued professional growth. Some general education instructors were then trained to help with the establishment of the other institutions.

Savannakhet and LuangPrabang Special Schools were the first to offer deaf education programs. Teachers of general education who had acquired sign language training were relocated to these schools to educate deaf children in the surrounding areas. Instructors who were already serving and future special education teachers received additional professional development training. However, due to a lack of funding and resources in the country, only a few teachers were able to attend the training. These two special schools' long-term goal is to provide programs for the blind, and both have been preparing for this new task.

3.4.4 Other Related Organizations

The Lao Autism Association (LAA): This association was founded in 2007 with the goal of assisting autistic children and their families. The LAA aims to raise autism awareness in Lao PDR and provide high-quality education, training, and therapy to children with autism so that they can participate fully in society. The LAA also serves as a support network for parents and caregivers of children with autism, as well as their communities. In addition, the association has developed materials and a handbook to help children with autism (Lao Autism Association, 2021).

The Lao Deaf Unit: This association was founded to raise awareness of deaf issues and to assist deaf persons to participate fully in mainstream society. The Lao Deaf Unit, like the LDPA, is a membership-based organization that caters to its members' specific needs. Sign language and vocational training, as well as advocacy and rights awareness initiatives, are among the services provided. The most notable result of this organization is the “Handtalk” website, which provides a video-based Lao sign language learning technique that includes many vocabulary words and sentences that are commonly used in daily life (Lao Deaf Unit, 2011).

4. Discussion

The national policy on inclusive education has a wide focus on all children regardless of their abilities, genders, ethnicities and social status. There is no specific policy on including children with disabilities, which could lead to challenges and misconception about inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools and societies. Sakiz and Woods (2015) indicated that in order to achieve inclusion of children with disabilities in

Turkey, the term ‘Inclusive Education’ would need to be discussed, clarified, and adopted by policy-makers, educators, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and social actors. Also, it would require the whole community to make inclusive education happen, as it should not depend only on individuals. Wade (2000) stated that inclusive education has only limited success when educators do not share responsibilities, and that collaboration requires individuals to interact and communicate with each other on an ongoing basis. As there is no inclusive special education course in Lao teacher education institutions, professional training for in-service and pre-service teachers is required. Save the Children (2002) suggested that training should be ongoing, provided in short courses (or modules) and should take place within a local school environment, preferably the teachers' own school. Training should be provided at both pre-service and in-service stages. Furthermore, community involvement is the key to developing sustainable inclusive schools and society. Making use of locally available human and material resources helps to develop links between schools, families and communities, as well as promoting community ownership of inclusive education programs (Save the Children, 2002).

5. Conclusion

In Laos, there has been an attempt to implement inclusive education for children with disabilities. As a result, some demonstration projects have been conducted in targeted communities, and some teachers have been trained to include children with disabilities in mainstream schools. There seem to be adequate resources such as handbooks and training manuals that inclusive education practitioners can use to facilitate the implementation of including children with disabilities in schools. In addition, the organizations of people with disabilities are playing important roles in advocating for and promoting inclusion of people with disabilities.

However, the demonstration projects seem unsustainable, as most of them have been funded by foreign non-profit organizations. The projects run well during their cycles, but after the funding ends, local communities cannot sustain the results by themselves. The existing resources and materials are not disseminated well, so members of the public do not know how to access these resources. The disabled people's associations work individually and

try to achieve their own goals rather than working collaboratively. Furthermore, there is no particular policy on inclusion of children with disabilities.

In order to enhance commitment towards inclusion of children with disabilities, the researcher recommends the following: (a) specific policies on inclusion of children with disabilities should be made by relevant authorities to help stakeholders adapt policies that move in the same direction, (b) all pre-service and in-service teachers should receive training on inclusive education for children with disabilities, which will help raise awareness and build positive attitudes among teachers who will directly work with children, (c) existing resources should be promoted and disseminated in ways that all people can gain access to, (d) relevant communities should work together to build stronger partnerships and create the same value of fully including children with disabilities in schools and society, and (e) local community members should be involved in demonstration projects and they should be taught how to sustain the projects using their local resources.

6. Conflict of Interest

I certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.

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