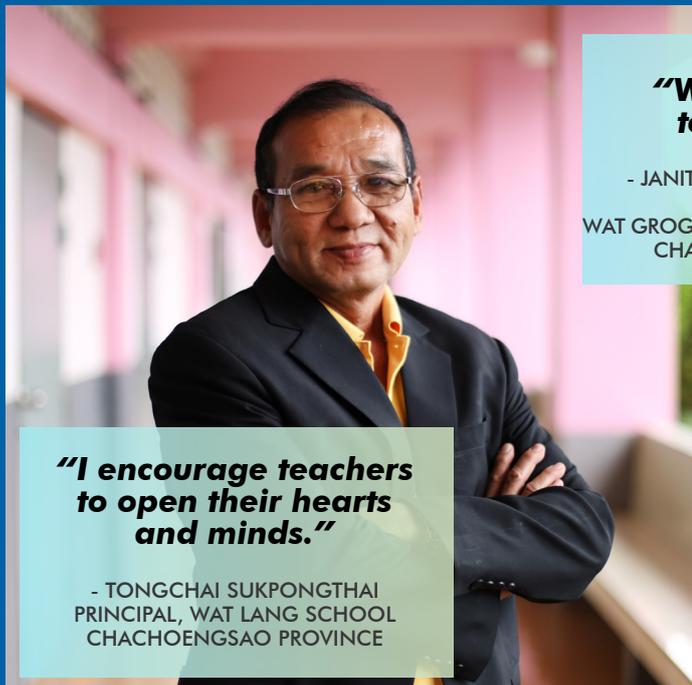


"Every student can learn"

Fighting for special education in Chachoengsao



"I encourage teachers to open their hearts and minds."

- TONGCHAI SUKONGTHAI
PRINCIPAL, WAT LANG SCHOOL
CHACHOENGSAO PROVINCE

"We need to teach to all abilities."

- JANITCHAYA SIRIPUN ("MRS. YUI")
SCIENCE TEACHER
WAT GROG GAEW WONG PRAJAN SCHOOL
CHACHOENGSAO PROVINCE



The snooker champion of Chachoengsao Province is a fourteen-year-old boy with a learning disability.

"I played against Joe, but I couldn't defeat him," Principal Tongchai Sukpongthai of Wat Lang school said of his ninth grade student.

Despite Joe's prowess at the billiards table, his razor-sharp ability with the cue does not translate naturally to literacy and math. Facing difficulty parsing out formulas and word problems, he can grasp mathematical concepts when explained through tactile objects. By grade 9, he had fallen years behind in conceptual learning whilst sitting in front of a blackboard.

Janitchaya Siripun, a science teacher known to Joe and her students as Mrs. Yui, summarized the mindset of more traditional teachers: "I was taught in this way, so I teach this way." However, Mrs. Yui noted, "the content doesn't reach all students."

In an education system as rigid as Thailand's, what happens to children who cannot reach conceptual understanding through traditional lectures?

Students diagnosed with learning disabilities (LD) in Thailand have been left behind. Socially stigmatized, and with little exposure to teachers or experts trained to provide the education they need, LD students are

often passed over in the classroom. Unsurprisingly, some students would rather stop coming to school at all than sit at a desk in quiet confusion day after day.

That's what happened to a student at Wat Lang School. Mrs. Yui recounts how the student's "crazy" questions convinced some teachers that he had an attitude. "There were too few people who believed that the child had the ability to learn."

Mrs. Yui sighs. "It hurt when the student left the school."

There are over 300,000 students classified as "learning disabled" (LD) in Thai schools.

However, in a recent nationwide examination of 400 students, the Independent Committee for Education Reform found that only 37 percent of students diagnosed with LD actually have a genuine LD.

"A teacher once told me that she thought all 20 students in her class had LD," said Thanyaluck Ingkavara, or "Nan," a master's student at Mahidol University's Institute for Innovative Education who focuses on special needs education.

Some schools are incentivized to declare large swaths of their students to be LD, because LD students are exempted from school O-NET scores and the funding per head for an LD

student is higher. At Wat Grog Gaew Wong Prajan School, very few students, one to two percent, are classified as LD.

"Here, we avoid labeling," said Mrs. Yui, whose principal discourages the practice of teachers taking students to the hospital to obtain an LD diagnosis. "The student might stress over it because they don't want to be marked as LD. They can learn."

"Learning disability is not real—there is only learning differently," concluded Mrs. Yui. "It also doesn't mean learning more slowly. Maybe slower in your way, but maybe quicker in another way."

In most cases, the best way to engage a student with special needs is to engage them in an 'inclusive classroom' with other students, as well as in an additional special education class, in which trained teachers can work closely with individual students.

"Instead of leaving special needs students in normal classes and ignoring them, or separating them in special needs classes, students can take the time to learn and then rejoin others, and have life skills to live in society as well," said Principal Pongrapee Preedanon of Wat Grog Gaew Wong Prajan School.

However, teachers currently receive very little training to address special needs students in their classrooms, and extra classes are still a rarity.

THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

Teaching to all abilities

In Mrs. Yui's classroom, she strives to leave no student behind.

"If you just focus on quick learners, teachers can just say what we have to say and leave. We don't have to work so hard. But we need to teach to all abilities," said Mrs. Yui.

"The first day you teach something, the students don't get it. The second day, you go back, and either you have to do the same thing, or you have to find a new way to teach."

For a unit on properties of matter, Mrs. Yui's students had trouble grasping the textbook definitions of solid, liquid and gaseous matter. She returned to the classroom with empty water bottles, colorful beads, glue, scissors, and straws. "The students were confused but excited," she recalled.

Together, teams of students made one bottle with the beads in glue, one with the beads in water, and one in which a straw could be used to blow the beads into the air.

"For the solid, when you hold it upside down, does it change? No," Mrs. Yui explained. She shakes the liquid bottle. "How about this one? Look, the molecules are moving."

Mrs. Yui holds an extra class session from 8:30 a.m. to noon every Saturday for students who need more time. In these sessions, Mrs. Yui spends more time one-on-one with students who have questions, and caters to different learning styles.

"I have to come up with new activities, topic by topic, to keep the interest of students. If you ask me if I felt prepared to teach students who learn differently, I was not properly trained. I have to come up with strategies on my own."

Principal Tongchai called government involvement in LD training "almost nonexistent." He explained: "They provide only 9,000 baht per month salary for a teacher to work with LD students, and only one LD teacher for the entire school. There is little follow-up or training. Sometimes four to five years can go by between LD trainings."

It's no wonder, then, that students face difficulty in their classrooms both academically and socially. "Some teachers see LD students as problem children. I encourage teachers not to punish LD students, or mistreat them, but to open their hearts and minds and try to understand them," said Principal Tongchai.

A CLASS OF ONE'S OWN

A special education pilot class

Eighth-grader Dan used to regularly skip classes.

Then one day, a teacher selected him to be one of seven students in a pilot LD classroom to be held at Wat Lang School. The pilot was funded and coordinated by the Chevron Enjoy Science project as part of a broader initiative to improve the teaching of low-performing students at disadvantaged schools.

Wat Lang School was chosen for its status as an opportunity extension school, which are mandated to accept all students free of tuition. Opportunity extension schools are filled with students who haven't entered test-based admission programs and whose parents cannot afford tuition for

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CHACHOENGSAO PROVINCE

private school; at Wat Lang School, many parents work in nearby industrial factories.

Every Friday during the last semester, a team of three teachers worked with seven students at Wat Lang school on STEM subjects from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The project invited Mrs. Yui from Wat Grog Gaew Wong Prajan School and Mrs. Nan from Mahidol University to teach alongside Mr. Somchok of Wat Lang School.

"All these years, I didn't realize I was LD," said the ninth-grade student Pat. "I thought, am I lazy, or am I stupid?"

For the first time, many of the students were taught specially to their needs. One boy preferred to do math problems with popsicle sticks; another was asked for the first time to explain his own process for multiplying two digit numbers in his head. Over the weeks, the students grew in confidence in their skills.

"Students laugh in my class," said

Mrs. Nan. "One student once laughed so hard that their head hit the window. The laughter of a student can make you feel that this is your life. You don't want anything from them, you just want them to grow up and be better."

When the teachers found out that some LD students were skipping other classes and only attending the LD class, they enacted a good attendance requirement to continue participating.

"Before Enjoy Science came in, some LD students would say they hate school, and were always trying to escape," said Principal Tongchai.

By the time the program ended, three students had gained full scholarships to Panyapiwat Technological College. Pat was especially praised by the admissions committee for his eloquence and leadership potential.

"I would like to extend a thank you to Chevron Enjoy Science for the opportunity to expand Mrs. Yui's knowledge," said Principal Pongrapee. Principal Pongrapee had allowed Mrs. Yui to teach once a week nearly an hour's drive away, in hopes that she could bring new strategies back to share with other teachers.

One Friday morning, weeks after the pilot LD classes had concluded for the semester, Principal Tongchai spotted one student, Dan, standing outside the door to the classroom. Teachers had told him that he keeps watch there every week.

"What are you doing here?" Principal Tongchai asked Dan.

"I'm waiting for the teachers."

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Serving special needs students

So what happens next for Dan and students like him?

Although the special needs class will not return for Dan's last year at Wat Lang School, there are seeds for change being sown on a national scale to make education more inclusive of and responsive to student needs.

The Chevron Enjoy Science project and Teacher's Council of Thailand just launched a 12-million baht fund to develop teacher capacity nationwide, with the goal of making education accessible, meaningful and enjoyable for all students. Schools are invited to apply for grants with an emphasis on science, math and literacy. Such coordinated efforts from teachers, principals and policymakers are necessary to work toward classrooms that, one day, leave no student behind.

In the meantime, students like Dan continue to stand outside classroom doors, waiting for teachers who are yet to return.