

2015

An Intersectional Analysis of Disability Experience in Thailand

Hannah Hunter
SUNY Geneseo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Hunter, Hannah (2015) "An Intersectional Analysis of Disability Experience in Thailand," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*. Vol. 2014, Article 7.

Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2014/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the GREAT Day Collections at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of GREAT Day by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact KnightScholar@geneseo.edu.

An Intersectional Analysis of Disability Experience in Thailand

Hannah Hunter

BACKGROUND

Each senior at SUNY Geneseo with a Women and Gender Studies Concentration or minor is required to design a research project that pulls all of our years of study together into something meaningful. For me, my direction for this project really hit close to home.

I am a Childhood/Special Education major at SUNY Geneseo with a concentration in Women and Gender Studies and a minor in Asian Studies. I have been traveling to Asia since 2008 and I have completely fallen in love with the multiple cultures that make up the beautiful place called Thailand. I have always had a passion for International Disability Studies. For the past four summers, I traveled to China to work at an orphanage for children who have disabilities and this past winter break, I spent a few weeks volunteering at the Father Ray Foundation's School for the Blind. Not only is this work my passion, but it is also a professional interest area that I hope I will figure into my life in the future. In addition to this, just last August, my parents decided that they would sell our house and move to Thailand after my mom was offered an

incredible teaching job at an International School. Upon my graduation from Geneseo, I want to continue my studies of Asian culture, Disability Studies, and what it means to live in this world when you don't fall under society's lens of "normal." Through my experiences in Thailand and my passion for disability studies, I have decided to research disability in Thailand. This project will explore what it means to experience a disability in Thailand where factors that include gender, religion, and culture are also considered intersectionally. Initially, due to Thailand's very welcoming and accepting views of foreigners and sexual orientation, I was under the impression that Thailand would be advanced in the field of disability rights, but this is not the case. There are multiple constraints both structurally and socially in Thailand; the current beliefs are engrained into their culture. I hope to highlight the importance of challenging the prominent understanding of disability as well as the ways that disability can challenge what we understand about human rights. This research is up and coming and I can only hope the more people talk about equal rights for all, that more changes will come.

DISABILITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

In order to fully understand what it means to have a disability in Thailand, we need to look at this issue through an intersectional lens. Intersectionality theory argues that there is power in examining issues in a simultaneous critique. Most people make the mistake of only examining one variable at a time, rather than recognizing that variables work in groups. Patricia Hill Collins states that intersectionality examines the many "interlocking systems of oppression" which give the true meaning of how one is living in today's society. There is never just one layer of oppression, but rather, it is encompassed by a criss-cross system of

oppression though race, class, gender, sexuality, and culture (Kidd, 7). The African American Policy Forum published an instructional document, "A Primer of Intersectionality," stating that intersectional beliefs were, "initially conceived as a way to present a simple reality that seemed to be hidden by conventional thinking about discrimination and exclusion. The simple reality is that disadvantage or exclusion can be based on the interaction of multiple factors rather than just one (African American Policy Forum)." There are so many intersectional factors that come into play when dissecting what it means to have a dis-

ability in Thailand, or anywhere for that matter. No layer of this research can stand on its own to provide a full picture of the experience. In the sections that

follow, I consider some specific influences that I view as valuable for my analysis.

DEFINING NORMAL AND BUDDHIST INFLUENCES

The overarching theme for my exploration into the cultural implications of disability in Thailand is the prominence and influence of Buddhism. For many, Buddhism is more than just a religion; it is a way of life. There are two opposing sides to how Buddhism affects Thai views of disability: karma and compassion. Karma can be described in many ways, but through my research, I am referring to karma using a definition from Dictionary.com, which refers to, “an action seen as bringing upon oneself inevitable results, whether they be good or bad, in this life or in reincarnation.” In other words, karma is the result of what happens to you through your past good or bad actions, to either reward you or punish you. It is perceived by Buddhist teachings that disability is a result of karma or sins committed in a past life (Vongkiatkajorn, 2011). This understanding is widely accepted, and may help explain why disability rights have only recently emerged as a major topic of discussion in Thailand. Beliefs about karma are engrained into their culture, and the steps needed to reevaluate cultural understanding from an outsider and Western tradition is tough. Teachings of karma show that our past actions affect us, either positively or negatively, and that our present actions will affect our future (BBC). According to Kanyakrit Vongkiatkajorn, “An inclusive society can only be achieved when people with disabilities are allowed to define their needs and the ways in which they should be addressed—become agents of their own lives rather than ‘objects to be taken care of.’” (Vongkiatkajorn). Buddhist societies, just as any other, are raised seeing certain things as “normal.”

Our Western societies define “normal” as informed by various historical influences which often results in the creation of lines to separate who is and who is not “normal.” The disability studies scholar and author of *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, Lennard Davis discusses this concept in depth. He examines how “normalcy” plays a major factor in our daily lives, whether we realize it or not. Think about it: there’s a normal curve in math, there’s an av-

erage height and average weight curve, there’s a normal cholesterol level, there’s an intelligence norm, but who decides what actually constitutes as “normal”? According to Davis, “We live in a world of norms.” In the instance of disability, Davis adds, “The ‘problem’ is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (Davis, 24). These ideas of what is “normal” only push more and more people out of this small realm. Davis establishes that the word “normal” has not always been in our vocabulary, and suggests instead if we would exchange the word “ideal” in place of “normal” things would make much more sense. An example of Davis’s definition being put into place can be seen when you analyze the meaning behind ‘an ideal body,’ rather than a ‘normal body,’ or an ‘ideal’ weight instead of a ‘normal’ weight. In Thailand, it is “normal” to not yell or call out, to not touch another person’s head, and to not point to things with your feet. This is just a small list of cultural practices held in high regard. However, if you do not follow these social structures, you will be judged by society in a different light—through your difference. This leaves human beings with disabilities forced to follow these societal and cultural practices in order to be understood as “normal.” According to Winfield Clark, a student of Tibetan Buddhism who was a composer and paraplegic for 40 years, “much of the suffering that comes with disability stems from the constant attempt to measure up to purported social norms. Disability causes invidious comparisons with ‘normal’ people and reveals our ‘inadequacy’ as members of society.” We “should” never become sick or disabled, age or die, but in reality, these things will happen to all of us (Bruno). Some also believe that Buddhists have a great deal of compassion for all people, showing that this relationship is a positive one. According to Vorapanya, “The fact that Thailand is predominantly a Buddhist society made the role of compassion for every living being and the consideration of ‘karma’ in relationship to disability key influences in Thai attitudes about children with special needs” (Vorapanya, 2008).

Another important aspect of Buddhism, which influences the understanding of disability, is the idea of dependence. According to Buddhist philosophy, disability is seen as a personal tragedy, which requires a person to be dependent on another. This has placed people with disabilities in an inferior role in Buddhist

societies, just as understood in Sawadsri's thesis, "Accessibility and Disability in the Built Environment." A person with a disability represents the "client" in the patron-client system, where the clients require help from the king or upper class (Sawadsri, 144).

HISTORY

According to Thailand's Constitution, disability is defined as, "persons who encounter certain limitations in performing their daily activities or social participation due to their impairment in vision, hearing, mobility, communication, mind, emotion, conduct, intellect, learning or any other impairment/disabilities along with various difficulties, and specifically need some assistance to enable them to perform their daily activities or social participation same as ordinary persons" (2007b, chapter I, section 4).

Although the above is taken from Thailand's Constitution, it was only inserted as recently as 2007. Disability rights have not always been central to a rights discussion in Thailand, but this isn't because people with disabilities did not exist. It is because they were not accounted for in the national census. In 2005, the International Disability Rights Monitor reported that only 0.4% of buildings were accessible to persons with disabilities, showing exclusive societal trends. Thailand had many clauses about non-discrimination of people with disabilities in their Constitution, but these rights were more so on paper than in practice. According to a national quota system, 1 out of 100 employees in both public and private companies must be a person with a disability, but if businesses do not follow this regulation, they must donate to an established governmental fund. This sets up a system that allows for companies to never hire people with disabilities as long as they set aside money for the governmental fund. This is not just because it fails to allow people with disabilities to enter the work force, especially if they don't have access to an education. People with disabilities in Thailand have access to an education, but if they are poor and live in a village far from a school, this right is compromised. What if education is not enforced in their family, but working in the field is important so that they can provide for their family? These are common situations, given that many people who live in the countryside of Thailand cannot consume access.

During my time volunteering at the Father Ray Foundation's Vocational School (FRF) in Pattaya, Thailand, I interviewed a teacher about the students in his classroom. He told me that most students come from the countryside of Thailand where education isn't discussed as an option because due to their disability or poverty level, their parents were not educated due to their disability or poverty level, so this cycle is continued. All of these students are physically disabled, and they come to Pattaya for two years to live at the Vocational School, but they leave speaking English fluently and with training experience to work in business or computer science. People with disabilities who are registered with the government in Thailand are eligible to receive 500 baht a month, in addition to access to services like free health care and government hospitals (Vongkiatkojorn, 2011). Five hundred baht is equivalent to around 16 USD, but one dollar goes much further in Thailand than it would in New York.

According to Antika Sawadsri, there was a Thai man named Hui who lived in his town years ago and had cerebral palsy on one side of his body. He would sell sweets and lottery tickets on the side of the street each day and his community would support him because they knew that he was supporting his family with that money. Years later, the state called Hui and asked him to register as a "Kon Pi-Garn," or "Disabled Person," and he would begin to receive a stipend of 500 Baht a month. The community recognized that he would begin to receive this money each month, so his business slowly disappeared and Hui began to stay inside his home each day, rather than be outdoors with no income (51). This is a prime example of the way that the Thai society views disabled people, only allowing them to receive enough to survive, but not recognizing that they should have the right to employment as well. Overall, prior to seven years ago, people with disabilities in Thailand had rights on paper, but not in reality.

THE YEAR OF INFLUENCE: 2007

The most influential time for Thailand's disability rights was between 2007 and 2008. In 2007, a national standard was issued, stating that nearly two million women and men in Thailand (3% of the population) had a disability, and most of these people lived in rural areas (Pozzan, 2009). The National Statistics Office 2007 Survey also stated that 65% of persons with disabilities over the age of 15 were unemployed, but of the unemployed, about half worked in agriculture and fishing (Pozzan, 2009). In addition, men with disabilities were more likely to have jobs than women with disabilities (43% of men with disabilities and 28% of women with disabilities). This high unemployment rate shows that people with disabilities are not being accepted into society in the way that other citizens are. If you are a disabled Thai male, you are more likely to work on a wage than a disabled Thai female. This confirms with the cultural norm that the male is permitted to leave the house and move into the public sphere to work before the female is permitted such freedom. To understand the culture of living with disability in Thailand means that these intersectional ideas of race, class, and gender all further reinstate the definition of shame in Thai culture. If you are a male, even if you are disabled, you are still more likely to work outside the home than a disabled woman. If you are in a higher class, these chances of employment increase even more. A disabled person's opportunity to work and use their skills in a positive way is compromised by cultural stigma—social class and cultural stigma in this instance.

Many people with disabilities also lack an education, which makes it very hard for them to get a job. It is common for many to end up selling lottery tickets on the side of the street, which is a very unstable and difficult thing to do (Vongkiatkojorn, 2011). The statistical report in 2007 was the first time that a statistic came out showing that Thailand was not caring for all of its population, so the government reacted

quite strongly to this, and quickly sought to remedy the situation. Although many people were on board to make change for the rights of those with disabilities in Thailand, there had never been a major social movement to officially make these changes in their society. After the statistics of 2007 came out, change began to occur, and the Thai government has added five legislations concerning the rights of people with disabilities. One of the biggest positive moves that the Thai government made was signing on to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (hereafter, CRPD). The CRPD is an international disability treaty that was written and advanced by international norms, which derive from a Western cultural norm, in recognizing the rights of people with disabilities. This is the first major step towards positive change for disability rights in Thailand.

The CRPD was approved for ratification in 2008, and the Royal Thai government regards the CRPD as an effective tool to transform our charity-based society into a rights-based society for persons with disabilities (Department of International Organizations, 2011). The government of Thailand has also implemented many laws and regulations in regards to the rights of people with disabilities in Thailand, most recently the National Persons with Disabilities' Quality of Life Development Plan and the National Persons with Disabilities Education Act (Pozzan, 2009). The Persons with Disabilities Education Act B.E. 2551 (2008) is intended for persons with disabilities to access education services and other resources at all levels and to improve the Thai educational system in order to enhance their quality of life and independent living through empowerment. The National Persons with Disabilities' Quality of Life Developmental Plan (Volume III) B.E. 2550-2554, is an integrated approach and holistic support and guidance for disability development practices for all authorities concerned (Department of International Organizations, 2011).

TOURISM

The main reason that disability rights became a publicized issue in Thailand was due to the census statistics that came out in 2007, showing that something needed to change. However, the reason these changes continued to attract attention and remain a topic of

continued discussion in Thailand, is due to primarily to tourism and second, to education through inclusion initiatives. It is clear that tourism is the key factor in the situation. In 1997, Thailand's economic crisis became a major starting point for accessibility.

There was a major drive to draw in greater interest in generating tourism in Thailand, so the government pushed to improve access through urban and rural development. Through this development, they considered access for visitors with physical disabilities, but this is not something that was considered right away, but rather grew with the increase in tourism. I interviewed Tom Bristow, who launched “Accessible Thailand,” (accessiblethailand.com). Bristow discussed what the tourist improvements have been like for people traveling with disabilities. When Bristow was 12 years old, he was involved in an accident that left him unable to use the right side of his body. This accident left life-long effects on his body, causing him to walk with a limp and unable to use his right arm. He stated:

For years I was very upset that this accident had happened to me and perhaps wallowed in my depression. This was until I started travelling. I am now 36, and have pretty much traveled the world... (February, 2014)

Bristow came to Thailand to be an English teacher and was welcomed by the “Land of Smiles” with such a welcoming attitude, despite his disability. This inspired him to start “Accessible Thailand,” an organization that encourages people with disabilities to come and travel in Thailand with no limits. They raise awareness for accessibility by posting accessibility rankings on their website for hotels, restaurants, clubs, and transportation, medical and popular

events. Accessible Thailand has created a community for people with disabilities who want to travel the world, specifically Thailand, and not have any worries during their trip about accessibility. This is just one example of how tourism is growing, but this organization is really helping to raise awareness on the importance of accessibility because it shows the importance of realizing there is not one stereotypical traveler, and they too are all unique with unique needs.

When examining disability experience in Thailand, it is very important to look at the intersectional relationship of class and culture, rather than look at them individually. This experience is complex and goes across many dimensions, but in order to fully understand the disability experience, all layers must be analyzed together. In addition to accommodating tourists with disabilities, Thai tourism targets a male audience. Thailand, especially Pattaya, is very well-known for their “bar girls” and prostitution profession. This caters to men (of all sexualities), and most of the money from foreigners comes in through this venue. Thailand’s economy receives about 7% of its GDP from international tourism revenue, which is a substantial 550 billion baht (or 16 billion USD) (Amazing Thailand). Thai culture is starting to shift so that it caters to foreign visitors, more so than its own citizens. Nonetheless, major changes for people with disabilities in Thailand happened because of the increase in tourists coming into Thailand who have disabilities.

EDUCATION

The increase in tourist activity also has resulted in a shift to an inclusive education model in the schools. According to Jacqueline Hunter, my mother and a Special Education teacher at the Regents International School in Pattaya, “The influx of expatriates in the country that are working for big corporations has impacted inclusion. Parents are coming with kids that have a diagnosis and an Individualized Education Program. The international schools are now providing special education services for these students that they did not provide at one time” (March 2014). In an article posted by the Guardian in 2012, “Thailand Takes First Steps on Long Road to Inclusive Mainstream Education”, the author discusses what it

means to have a disability in the Thai schools today. The journey towards a fully inclusive education system in Thailand is at the beginning stages, but with strong commitment from those in the field of education, changes can continue to occur.

Between 2000 and 2004, the number of students with disabilities accessing education increased from 145,000 to 187,000 and they were taught at more than 18,000 inclusive schools (Chambers, 2012). According to the National Education Act of 1999, any disabled person was technically able to go to school if they wished, but it is not until recently that these opportunities are proven in government-collected statistics collected by the government. Again, here

we are looking at disability experience through the intersectional influences of race, class, and culture. One of the major responses from the teachers in districts who do not teach all students is that they do not have enough “training, resources, or money.” Although this is true in public schools, there is this misconception that the training to teach students with disabilities would be rigorous and impossible. Yet in reality, experience is where you would learn the most about educating all students informed by inclusive pedagogy.

International Private Schools have had more success in the beginning stages of the shift to inclusive education due to their funding, but according to Jacqueline Hunter, the funding for this is coming straight from the parents in the International Schools. Jacqueline noted that, “Our schools do not have the services available to them that are provided in the schools in the United States. The parents need to pay separately for services. Only one international school in our area provides free special education support. The schools do not have OT, speech, PT, or school psychologists. They need to contract outside of the school and pay extra” (March, 2014). I found this

fact to be extremely interesting because here in the United States we tend to complain about the services our students are receiving in special education, yet in Thailand, these services are not even included in the large tuition it requires to enroll in an international school. According to Sermsap Vorapanya’s *A Model for Inclusive Schools in Thailand*, the major reason Thailand is still in the beginning stages of this change is because there hasn’t been a monumental movement yet. In the United States during the 1960s and 1970s we had a Civil Rights movement in order to make the final push towards these educational rights for all, but Thailand has yet to have a movement like this. The principals of the schools are on board, but due to the limited resources and funding, they can only do so much at this point. Thailand is on the right track to an inclusive education system, but unless the government or the Thai people rise up together to make real changes, laws are only on paper, and ideas are just thoughts. Disability Rights in Thailand have continued to grow and shift more due to an increase in tourism, which has led to the slow process into an inclusive education system where all are given equal opportunities.

THE HIERARCHY OF ABILITY

The term *disability* encompasses various stratifications of ability, and includes a hierarchy of ability that defines where citizens actually stand in society. In Thailand, there are four major levels in this hierarchy: visible disability, high-class disability, hidden disability, and learning disability.

VISIBLE DISABILITY AND HIGH CLASS DISABILITY

Visible disability refers to someone with a physical disability or deformity that all outside people can automatically assume means that they are “unable.” This is not always the case, but many people view people with visible disabilities as weak, incapable, and needy. According to Tom Bristow from Accessible Thailand, “If you have a noticeable disability in Thailand, the broad perspective is that you are looked down upon even more. I think this is for two reasons. The first being the Thai belief in Buddhism and the cycle of birth and death, meaning if you are a disabled person in this life, you must’ve done something very bad in

your last life and therefore you should get treated accordingly. The second reason is fairly simply, it all comes down to money; which earns you respect So if you are a dark skinned Thai disabled person, with no money, life is going to be very unforgiving” (February, 2014). In the public sphere, disabled people are mostly poor. When looking at the hierarchy of ability, we are looking at the intersectionality of culture, race, and class.

In addition to the stigma associated with the visibility of your disability, material wealth and the complexion of one’s skin also plays a huge role. “Hi So” (people with light skin and wealth) are considered high class in comparison to “Low So” (people with dark skin who perhaps do what is considered a labor job). This is something that has been engrained in the culture for years, so when you add disability into the mix, skin tone and money still will play an important role when it comes to a person with a disability stands in the hierarchy of ability. A person with a disability who is “Hi So” will have access to more rights,

privileges and opportunities, but will they recognize the need to push this for others when they stand so high in the society's hierarchal structure? Something very interesting that came up in my interview with Tom Bristow however, was the idea that this caste system applies to Thai people with disabilities, but if you are a foreigner, or 'Farang,' with a disability in Thailand, the Thai people can't seem to do enough for you, showing their country in the most positive light and reflecting good face for those visiting. This just further instates the importance of looking at each individual layer intersectionally in order to understand the true meaning of experience. For example, if you just look at two layers (wealth and disability), yet the individual is also Thai and Buddhist, we are not recognizing the cultural implications that define their beliefs, rights, and lifestyles. If you are a foreigner with a disability in Thailand, your status and rights will be exponentially different than that of a Thai disabled person, simply because the Thai culture caters to their tourist population in order to improve their economy.

HIDDEN DISABILITY

Hidden disability in Thailand refers to those who have a disability but you wouldn't know by just looking at them. In Thailand, they are very much centered on the medical model of disability. They define disabled people as "Kon Pi-garn" which is a category decided by medical professionals. Three out of five of these categories are hidden disabilities, with visual disabilities and physical/mobility disabilities being visible. Within the realm of hidden disabilities comes what it means to be an "ideal Thai citizen." According to Samuifiner's guide to good behavior in Thailand, it is very important that you: "Don't touch someone's head, don't complain loudly or shout, and don't point at things or people with your finger, and never touch things with your feet." (Samuifinder, 2006). This is just a small list of examples, but for students, who have hidden disabilities such as emotional disturbance, imagine how these students must be viewed in a Thai society.

According to an interview I did with Theresa Montenarello, a Geneseo Alum and Peace Corps Volunteer in Thailand, she has noticed this in her school. Theresa stated that:

[She has] one boy in kindergarten at [her] school whom has an emotional disorder and the teachers let him run around the school during class yelling and throwing things because they don't know how to help him (and it's very not Thai like to show emotions like that) its all really sad (December, 2013)

This is a perfect example to show that teachers feel like they don't have the training to support disabled students, so they just let things be and try to ignore it, thinking that there's nothing they can do. If it's not very "Thai like" for students to run around screaming or complaining loudly, imagine how helpless that student must feel, trapped in a school where nobody will support him. It is also important to think about this in terms of adults. If it's not very Thai like for adults to run around being loud or complaining, are there any rules about being publicly drunk?

In Pattaya, there are tourist police in charge of, and ensuring that intoxicated foreigners are not causing and problems or fights. Thailand is a very safe place, and through my personal experience, I feel safer walking on the streets in Asia than I do in the city here in New York. So although they hold students to the standards of being "Thai like" in the schools, these cultural characteristics also hold true for adults. You shouldn't expect to see people going against these norms without repercussions. In order for hidden disabilities to be understood and accepted into Thai culture, there will have to be a cultural shift.

LEARNING DISABILITIES

Learning Disabilities in the classrooms of Thailand have this same need for a cultural shift. Learning Disabilities can manifest in numerous ways, but typically they refer to a lack of intellectual understanding of certain subject areas in the classroom. These are usually specific and cause difficulty for the student to sustain progress in the classroom, but in most cases, you would never know this until you were working with the student through informal assessments in the classroom. This is something that has been changing in the last few years in Thailand. According to Jacqueline Hunter, "I see it changing here in the eight months I've been here mainly in the international schools. We are starting a SENCO (Special Educa-

tion Needs Coordinator) organization in the Pattaya area that will support parents and the community. We have a board that is made up of special educators in the surrounding international schools. We are creating a website that will have resources and other services for parents, such as Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Speech, and evaluations for parents to contact” (March, 2014). This again shows the ded-

ication of the teachers into shifting towards a more inclusive education system. Over the next few years, if Jacqueline has seen changes in just the past eight months, we will hopefully see even more positive change. The hierarchy of ability within the disability spectrum is something we could continue to break down into even smaller groups.

ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

There are many organizations that are trying to push for disability rights in Thailand. The Father Ray Foundation (FRF) is an organization in Pattaya, Thailand that runs a Vocational School, a School for the Blind, a Children’s Home, a Drop-In Center, a Children’s Village, a Day Care Center, and a Center for Children with Special Needs. Many passionate people power this organization and I had the opportunity to volunteer at the School for the Blind and the Vocational School this past December through January. Many of the students in the Vocational School come from rural areas where education is not seen as an option for a person with a disability. At the School for the Blind, these students also live here for schooling, and they have a very structured day consisting of school, play, swimming, and sports. This organization provides a very welcoming and positive environment for the students so that they can gain the education that will help them become successful (Fr-Ray.org). As mentioned before, Accessible Thailand, created by Tom Bristow, is another organization that is advocating for disability rights in Thailand through promoting accessibility for those with disabilities who want to/deserve to travel the world (Bristow, 2013). This organization is continuing to grow as more and more people with disabilities choose to travel the country of Thailand.

Always Reading Caravan was an organization created by Yoshimi Horiuchi, a blind woman, which is committed to promoting the joy of reading and learning. The average literacy rate in Thailand is 92.3%, but the average number of books a child reads per year is five (Horiuchi, 2011). The organization focuses on rural villages and promotes reading for enjoyment, including students with disabilities. They encourage children with and without disabilities to interact with one another through education to remove any pre-conceived barriers. This organization is very important because it is not only promoting the acceptance of students with disabilities in rural villages, but is also promoting their right to an education.

The Global Campuses Foundation in Northern Thailand is an organization that has been around for eight years and focuses on day-to-day skills and work training for those with disabilities who would otherwise not receive an education. They are very similar to the FRF’s Vocational School, and their curriculum focuses mostly on disability pride, celebration of ability, confidence, and workforce training. This organization also functions in very rural areas of Chang Mai, but they reach more than 1,000 adults per year. All of these organizations are key contributors to the up and coming disability rights movement in Thailand.

CONCLUSION

Race, class, gender, religion, and culture may seem to be straight forward intersectional concepts to consider when looking at the effects they have on human rights in Thailand, but when you throw disability into the mix, you are only discussing what its implications are in this present moment. Things are constantly changing and we are constantly changing. Other countries, such as Thailand, are basing their “norms” on Western “norms,” but with our “norms”

changing, it is very hard to predict what “normal” actually means going forward. During such a changing and influential time, where will these “norms” shift? Western “norms” have fueled funding and rights for people with disabilities worldwide, causing a movement where people have the right to stand up for change, which has fueled the global impulse to be like the Western society. We are changing the norm for the world’s view on “normal”, but how long will

this take? Thailand is currently in the beginning stages of disability rights and inclusive education, which is why this research is so important.

Not only are these thoughts just beginning to be talked about, but they're also starting to reach governmental authority. Disability brings everything in our being into question, because when you think about it, as we grow older, we are all really heading to acceptance of our innate "brokenness." A quote that will remain salient with me comes from Ajahn Chah, a Thai Buddhist teacher, who states:

You see glass? For me, this it is already broken. I enjoy it. I drink out of it. It holds my water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns. But when the wind knocks it over or my elbow brushes it off the table and it

shatters, I say 'Of course.' When I understand that this glass was already broken, every moment with it is precious (Bruno)

Once we accept that everything and everyone on this earth, including the universe that contains us, will change and pass away, we are recognizing the truth in potential suffering. We are all already broken, but when society defines you as more broken than others, that is when you fall under the hierarchy of abilities. Disability brings everything that we are and think we know into question, and it's important to think of yourself when discussing disability rights and the importance of compassion for those that don't fit our current definition of "normal." For "normal" is changing, just as we are, and by recognizing the imperfections of life and humanity, together we can fight for human rights around the world.



Works Cited

Amazing Thailand. About Thailand: economy. Retrieved from <http://www.tourismthailand.org/Thailand/economy>.

Asia Pacific Development Center on Disability (2010). Thailand statistics. Retrieved from <http://www.apcdfoundation.org/?q=content/thailand>.

BBC Religions (November 17, 2009). Karma. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/beliefs/karma.shtml>.

Bristow, Tom (2013). Accessible Thailand: The disabled travelers' essential guide to Thailand.

Retrieved from <http://www.accessiblethailand.com/>.

Bruno, Richard. Buddhism plus disability: one "step" closer to nirvana. Handicapped Buddhism. Retrieved from <http://www.angelfire.com/electronic/awakening101/ada-buddhism.html>.

Chambers, Andrew (March 27, 2012). Thailand takes first steps on long road to inclusive mainstream education. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/mar/27/thailand-first-steps-inclusive-education>.

- Davis, L. J. (1995). *Enforcing normalcy: Disability, deafness, and the body*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Department of International Organizations (2011). Thailand's status with regard to the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (CRPD) and the realization of the MDGs for persons with disabilities. Retrieved from <http://www.mfa.go.th/humanrights/implementation-of-un-resolutions/136-thailands-status-with-regard-to-the-convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd-and-the-realization-of-the-mdgs-for-persons-with-disabilities>
- Global Campuses Foundation (2009). *Global campuses foundation: northern Thailand*. Retrieved from <http://globalcampuses.org/thailand-campuses/>.
- Horiuchi, Yoshimi (2011). *Always reading caravan: spreading the joy of reading*. Retrieved from <http://alwaysreadingcaravan.org/php/story.php>.
- Kidd, Dustin (2009). *Intersectional Theory: Patricia Hill Collins*. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/dustinkidd1/intersectional-theory>.
- Pozzan, Emanuela (July 2009). *Inclusion of people with disabilities in Thailand*. Retrieved from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_112307.pdf.
- Samuifinder (2006). *Good behavior in Thailand*. Retrieved from <http://www.samuifinder.com/en/koh-samui-info/social-life-culture/good-behavior-in-thailand/>
- Sawadsri, Antika (May 7, 2011). *Accessibility and disability in the built environment: negotiating the public realm in Thailand*. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/srains/accessibility-and-disability-a-study-of-thailand-by-a-sawadsri>.
- The Father Ray Foundation (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.fr-ray.org/en/>
- Vongkiatkajorn, Kanyakrit (September 2011). *The missing disability sign: a look into disability rights in Thailand*. Retrieved from <http://www.chiangmainews.com/ecmn/viewfa.php?id=3281>.
- Vorapanya, Sermsap (December 2008). *A model for inclusive schools in Thailand*. Retrieved from https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/9487/Vorapanya_Sermsap_PhD_Fall08.pdf?sequence=1.