Giving voice: inclusive early childhood teachers' perspectives about their school leaders' leadership practices

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ABSTRACT

Educational leadership has been identified as an important predictor of quality inclusive education. Yet much remains to be learned about how early childhood teachers who work in inclusive kindergartens in developing country contexts experience leadership practices. This article uses teacher voice, framed in dialogic interviews as the method of inquiry to collect qualitative data from 15 early childhood teachers from three private kindergartens in Thailand. The focus was on how these teachers experienced principals' leadership practices. Framework Analysis combined with an interpretivist perspective revealed three interrelated themes that echoed a common voice across themes that described leadership as a 'command' and rules to follow. Our research contributes to existing knowledge by drawing attention to leadership training within the ideals of responsibility to all in order to cultivate and enact leadership with teachers for improvements to occur in inclusive early childhood educational settings.

Introduction

Increasing diversity of children in early childhood education calls for inclusive practice and strong leadership to mitigate the adverse effects of children's developmental vulnerabilities (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). In this study, we used the term 'inclusion' in two ways. First, to describe educational processes that eliminate barriers to learning for all students, and secondly, we apply the concept to leadership to describe leadership dispositions that welcome, value, nurture and support diversity among staff (Ferdman et al., 2021). In this sense, early childhood inclusive education is an early education process that welcomes diversity, continuously focuses on identifying and eliminating barriers to learning, increasing participation, and responding to each child's unique developmental and learning needs (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). This broad definition makes all important, the roles of leadership in early childhood education.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to create a dialogic space with Thai early childhood teachers to share their views about leadership within their inclusive kindergartens. This project positions teacher voice as central in understanding the enactment of

leadership (Gozali et al., 2017). Focusing on teachers' voices can help us understand the conditions under which they work to implement inclusive education for young children. The research questions that informed our study were as follows: What does leadership within the landscape of early childhood education look like? What are the main concerns that teachers describe regarding leadership practices? These questions prompted discursive practices that involved multiple experiential voices, and their contribution to a deeper understanding of leadership in selected private kindergartens that serve diverse children including those with disabilities. According to Riehl (2000),

> when wedded to a relentless commitment to equity, voice, and social justice, administrators' efforts in the tasks of sense making, promoting inclusive cultures and practices in schools, and building positive relationships outside of the school, may indeed foster a new form of practice. (p. 71)

In inclusive educational settings, school leaders are expected to enact leadership as a shared responsibility and work inclusively with early childhood teachers in catering for diversity (Odom et al., 2011). According to Palaiologou and Male (2019), 'successful engagement by practitioners in the quest to provide effective learning environments for preschool children' must focus on leadership as a 'pedagogical praxis' (p. 24).

In Thailand, where this study was conducted, early childhood education is organized into public and private schools in terms of nurseries and kindergartens. The private kindergartens are huge with some having enrollments up to 1000 children. These gigantic kindergartens operate as profit-making schools. This market economy-oriented practice (Ang, 2014) coupled with how Brooks (2015) described 'Thailand [as] a highly bureaucratic and hierarchical society where relationships are built on an understanding of superior and inferior social positioning' (p. 235), give rise to leadership as conserving role. For example, a Thai study by Sawaddemongkol et al. (2017) found that dictatorial leadership of administrators and insecure work atmosphere were some important factors inhibiting inclusive and quality service delivery in private kindergartens. Similarly, an earlier study by Hankiettipong (2012) found that Thai private kindergarten leaders created a culture of top-down management processes where teachers were excluded from decision-making on matters affecting their professional practice.

Researchers (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) have found that strong and shared leadership translate into high-quality early childhood education. In the leadership literature, different types of leadership abound, such as distributed, transformational, democratic, relational, praxeological and participative (Muijs et al., 2004; Murray & McDowall, 2013; Pascal & Bertram, 2012; Spillane et al., 2004). However, conceptualizing leadership in early childhood through the lenses of teaching and learning (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011) or what Palaiologou and Male (2019 'propose as pedagogical praxis' (p. 29), has the potential for including teachers in the leadership process as respectful actors in the delivery of quality teaching and care for all children (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). School leaders' involvement and positive dispositions toward inclusion, teachers and all children are viewed as essential components of inclusive practice (Gumus et al., 2013; Lambrecht et al., 2020).

It is argued that leadership in early childhood education that connects to socially just processes have many significant benefits for teachers and children (Crippen & Willows, 2019). However, early childhood teachers are not always involved in

leadership activities. Inclusive leadership embraces the whole early childhood school community in developing inclusive practices for the benefit of all children. Lieberman and Miller (2004) claimed that teachers who are given the opportunity to be involved in leadership assume a 'unique position to make change happen' (p. 12). School leaders have different ways of leading their schools depending on their institutional and individual personal dispositions. For example, transformational, democratic, relational, praxeological and participative leaders create opportunities for others to be involved in authentic decision-making in critical matters of the school that enhance the educational achievements of all children (Palaiologou & Male, 2019). In contrast, autocratic leaders exclude teachers from core decision-making, thus creating barriers to full participation of all in education (Eacott, 2016). According to Precey (2011), if we want inclusive schools to be responsive to all children's needs, leadership must promote equity by involving all teachers in decision-making.

Implementing inclusive practice poses unique challenges to school leaders and their teachers because of the requirement to embrace all children, continuously transform the schools' operational cultures and practices to offer new opportunities to children with developmental and learning difficulties (Armstrong, 2006; Carter & Abawi, 2018). Inclusive schools may have difficulty addressing the diverse needs of children without having core leadership principles that center on equity and social justice for all. For example, Fullan (2001) explains that effective school leadership must have a moral purpose, deep knowledge of the change process, a focus on relationship building, knowledge creation and sharing, and institutional coherence. This means, schools' policies and practices must reflect a strong focus on every child's and teachers' rights through responsive engagement with everyone within the school community (Deppeler et al., 2015; Lambrecht et al., 2020). In Slavin's (2017) view, it is through leadership's focus on the right to responsive care and well-being, that the quality of education can be realized for all children. Studies show that a strong focus on inclusion improves teaching and learning for all young children, particularly when school leaders engage the school's community in a collaborative ongoing decision-making (Florian, 2008; Jordan & McGhie-Richmond, 2014).

Notwithstanding the attractiveness of inclusion, its implementation faces leadership challenges as reported in previous studies (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Florian, 2008; Sharma & Desai, 2008). Key among them is building inclusive school culture and enacting inclusive leadership practices that involve everyone (Carter & Abawi, 2018; Florian, 2008; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004; Lambrecht et al., 2020).

Thinking leadership with inclusive education

Inclusive Leaders in inclusive schools adopt effective collaboration culture, empower others, and pay attention to diverse ways of thinking and doing to drive a cohesive vision for equity, social justice, and excellence for all (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Lambrecht et al., 2020). In addition, some authors have argued that inclusive leadership thrives on visible commitment to diversity in ways that challenge taken for granted assumptions, beliefs, and norms (Day & Sammons, 2013; Eacott, 2016; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010). Research findings indicate that inclusive leaders care about others and demonstrate an

open mindset, think deeply about others, are open to alternative views without judgment, have empathy and value those who work with them (Dorczak, 2011; Goddard et al., 2015).

Despite research pointing out key valued attributes of inclusive leaders, a major challenge in inclusive schools is linked to professional boundaries between principals and teachers (Sharma & Desai, 2008). Boundaries create conceptual, philosophical, paradigmatic, or physical limitations (Blase & Anderson, 1995; Ernst & Yip, 2009). Inclusive schools stand the chance for effectiveness when professionals developed practices that enable working across vertical, demographic, geographic and stakeholder boundaries (Yip et al., 2016). By vertical boundaries, leadership encourages working across levels and hierarchy of authority and power. Transcending horizontal boundaries involves the development of school ethos that support cross-functional collaboration (Harris, 2005). Again, Harris (2005) described working across geographical boundaries as functions that connect different contexts, distance and location, and demographic boundaries as working across diverse cultural, religious, age and class groups.

The literature identified that it is challenging for school leaders to work well across levels and authority due to differences in professional titles, ranks, power and privilege (Carter & Abawi, 2018; Harris, 2005; Northouse, 2013; Precey, 2011). However, the ability of school leaders to break down hierarchies of power can lead to a strong collaborative practice in inclusive schools (Ernst & Yip, 2009; Lalonde, 2013). According to Yip et al. (2016), leadership practices:

> call for a critical transformation in leadership from managing and protecting boundaries to boundary spanning - the capability to create direction, alignment, and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal . . . the transformation of organizations from rigid hierarchical structures to networked structures with flows of people, information, and resources across boundaries. (pp. 2 & 12)

Traditionally, school leaders work independently to manage their school systems vertically as bosses (Harris, 2005). Evidence suggests that when school leaders realize the value of professional interconnectedness, they break down professional boundaries, enabling them to work effectively across functions and positions to achieve their schools' inclusive goals (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). According to Yip et al. (2016), leaders need to develop strategies to manage boundaries by clarifying roles, purposes, and areas of specialization for members within the school community. Similarly, others argued for the need to develop trust and common understanding by identifying and strengthening what is universally important and shared by all members of the school community (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016; Harris, 2005; Yip et al., 2016). Research in leadership for inclusive practice thus provide a solid foundation for harnessing collective expertise, experience, and resources to support innovation and transformation in inclusive practices.

The study context

This study was conducted in Thailand's capital city of Bangkok, a South-east Asian country with an estimated population of 69 million with six administrative regions and 77 provinces (The World Bank, 2019). Thailand has a compulsory education policy that

covers the first nine years of 'basic education' (six years of elementary school and three years of lower secondary school). Education at public schools is free of charge and at present, the government provides three years of free pre-school and three years of free upper-secondary education, neither of which are mandatory. The Office of Basic Education Commission is responsible for early childhood education (Vibulpatanavong, 2017). Kindergarten forms part of the preschool system of early childhood education. Children usually attend kindergarten any time between the ages of two and seven years, depending on the local province requirement. There are both private and public kindergartens and usually private kindergartens are profit-based institutions with high patronage by wealthy parents who pay high fees for their children to have a solid educational foundation prior to entering primary school.

Currently, little is known about Thai private kindergarten teachers' perceptions of their school leaders. In this study, we gave opportunity to 15 teachers in three inclusive private kindergartens to describe their school leaders' leadership practices. This goal is important for gaining insights into how teachers are involved in decision-making to support all children in these kindergartens.

Method

We adopted a flexible approach that involved free talk or dialogic interviews to enable participants talk about leadership issues as they are enacted within their own context. Situating this research in the epistemology of dialogic interviews involves listening to multiple voices, which is more than interviewees responding to our questions (Dyer & Löytönen, 2012; Sullivan, 2012). Dialogic interviews stimulated, extended and deepened our knowledge on the meanings that participants assign to their experiences, which they communicated through their authentic voices (Alexander, 2008). We were influenced by Shor and Freire's (1987) definition of dialogue as

> a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it. Something else: To the extent that we are communicative beings who communicate to each other as we become more able to transform our reality, we are able to *know that we know*, which is something *mor*e than just knowing. [. . .] Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don't know, we can then act critically to transform reality. (p. 13)

It is argued that since teachers are at the frontline of inclusive education practice, researching their voices through dialogue is an important endeavor to understand how they feel about their leaders in their implementation of inclusion (Alexander, 2008). Indeed, Freire (1970) argued that through dialogue, hidden voices can emerge to give us cumulative awareness and subjective knowledge on issues that traditionally are difficult to talk about.

Ethical considerations

This research adhered to the ethical principles and guidelines of Mahidol University (MUSSIRB2018/146(B2), which offered internal grant to support this study. We provided a detailed explanatory statement about the research and obtained informed

consent from all participants in the study. Participation in this research was made voluntary with option to withdraw at any time without consequences. To ensure confidentiality for the participants, pseudonyms were used to represent the participant interviews and schools with no identifying information to the specific locations where the study was conducted. Only the region where the study was conducted was mentioned, but since Bangkok is a large urban area, it is not possible to identify the individual schools and teachers.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to locate three private kindergartens, which described their schools as inclusive settings. Although having students with disabilities in mainstream schools do not necessarily constitute inclusive practice (Deppeler et al., 2015), the schools consider themselves inclusive schools because they enrolled children with disability and special education needs who study alongside their peers without disabilities. For example, at least 5% of their student population were labeled with special education needs and/or disability. Fifteen female teachers aged from 20 to 55 years were purposively sampled from the three designated inclusive private kindergartens (5 teachers from each school). The kindergartens cater for students aged 4–6 years. The purposive sampling approach provided opportunity for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the purpose of the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). For example, teachers who had regular contact with children with special education needs and/or disability were invited to participate. Information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

Data collection

Face-to-face individual dialogic interviews were conducted by the second author with the participants between June and August 2019. The interviews, which took place outside of school hours were lengthy because of the dialogic approach, averaging an hour for each participant to dialogue with the interviewer, thus totaling 15 hours of dialogic interviews. In addition to digitally recording the

Table 1. Participant information.

Participants with pseudonyms	Age of participants in years	Qualification	Teaching experience in years
Achara	23	Diploma[a]	3
Apinya	20	Bachelor	1
Boonsri	33	Diploma[a]	8
Busarakham	50	Diploma[a]	26
Duangkamol	22	Bachelor	1
Gamon	35	Bachelor	10
Kanda	27	Bachelor	6
Kamon	41	Masters	12
Preeda	48	Bachelor	14
Darika	36	Bachelor	13
Chimlin	49	Bachelor	15
Arinya	21	Diploma[a]	1
Kunlap	28	Bachelor	3
Malee	31	Bachelor	7
Sunan	29	Bachelor	5

[a]Post-secondary/high-school non-degree qualification.

interviews, field notes were taken. Participants were given opportunity to listen to the audio files, and to approve the recordings. During the framework analysis, some comments from five of the participants triggered interesting moments in the data that needed follow-up interviews. The follow-up interviews were shorter and lasted on an average of 25 minutes with each participant. Sample interview questions include: How would you describe leadership in your school? How would you describe your principal? Thinking about inclusion in the early years, what are the main favorable leadership practices your principal uses to support you? What do you find challenging in this school's leadership regarding the implementation of inclusion?

Data analysis

We applied the five steps of Framework Analysis – familiarization; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; and mapping and interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). According to Parkinson et al. (2015), the framework analysis approach provides flexibility in handling and analyzing data as it is not confined to any theoretical framework. We started the analysis with familiarization which involved deep and focused reading through the transcripts many times to understand its content. This led to the second stage where we developed a coding framework to code the data. At the indexing stage, we carefully annotated the transcripts and our codes to ascertain consistencies and grouped together similar codes. This was followed by charting where we rearranged the coded data and thematic framework, revisited the data for missing codes and refined the codes into themes for interpretation. The final stage, which was mapping and interpretation, involved a deeper exploration of the themes in relation to the representative quotes that illustrate the overarching meanings of our data set.

Findings

It does feel like 'an inclusive place' but 'not really inclusive'

In this study, early childhood teachers were asked to talk about how they perceived their school leaders' leadership practices within their inclusive school settings. This is important because the practices and processes that enhance the work of teachers depend on leadership and support. The favorable aspects of leadership that connote an inclusive place for the teachers were things that relate to the provision of teaching resources to their schools. All the teachers commented positively on the level of resources they were able to access in their schools, which afforded them the tools to teach all children. They mentioned, for example, computers, iPad, TVs, drawing materials and books for children and teachers to use daily.

Kanda opined that

> Our principal makes sure the school has what the teachers need to teach the children. As a private school, parents paid a lot of money and this money is used for all these resources, ... the leadership makes sure everything the children need, we have it.

Chimlin also described her school as a well-resourced school, saying: 'The leadership is good in terms of providing resources. We have the materials that we need to teach the children. The school has a large swimming pool, a gym and therapy rooms for early intervention'. Kamon, another teacher reiterates: 'In terms of resources, I have no problem but it's the attitude of the principal that is dispiriting'.

Despite these positive comments about resource-rich school environments, generally, teachers held unfavorable views about their principals' leadership dispositions and practices that did not resonate with inclusive climate. Twelve out of the 15 teachers described their principals as 'inconsiderate', always placing extra demands, which caused them stress and disaffection. Achara said: 'Working in this school is very stressful because the classes are large and the demand from the principal is unreasonably high with little support for us to cope with children with special needs'. Another teacher shared that opinion.

> Being asked to do many things, especially when you have children with disability, but the principal keeps loading you with tasks without helping with strategies to cope with your work, it is like carrying heavy responsibilities with no helper. We need fresh ideas to support the children who have special needs. We need time to think about new ideas, but workload takes this precious time away. (Busarakham)

The perspectives of some teachers revealed a concern for lack of professional learning programs they expected would be initiated by their principals to equip them with new strategies for their daily practice of inclusion.

> I completed my bachelors long time ago when no school is practicing inclusion in Thailand. We are just using the same general skills; I feel that it is the leaders' duty to provide refresher courses on new ideas on inclusion before accepting children with disabilities into the school. (Darika)

Kunlap added,

> The principals are interested in telling us what to do ... they would say, 'teach the children well. If the children don't do well, you would be held responsible for it. I think this is unfair because the teachers take all the blame and pressure.

The findings also indicate that working under stressful conditions have led some teachers to change schools many times. Busarakham, the oldest among the interviewees with 26 years of teaching experience said,

> I keep changing schools to survive this profession. It is a difficult experience for me as this is my fifth school ... I am looking for comfort and respect, but the principals I came across, they all put value on academic outcomes alone. I think when they value and respect me, I will feel more comfortable to do the work they expected of me.

Preeda, another participant claimed: 'Every school you go, you will get the same pressure from the principals. They want you to perform beyond your level without adequate support ... you want to quit but you need to earn money to eat'. Some other teachers expressed that although they experienced pressure from their principals, their attachment to the children they teach and desire to make a difference in their lives were the reasons they were still working in their schools. Arinya for example, said:

> I wanted to leave my school, the demands from the principal were overwhelming but I stayed for the little children . . .. I love them, even the ones with disability are all interesting to teach. I think I am making a difference.

Every voice must count

The teachers who participated in this study articulated the need for shared meaning making to create the right working environment so that teachers can freely and confidently meet the needs of all children. The teachers particularly shared about their vulnerability pertaining to how their voices have often been silenced by their leaders. Malee narrated:

> The culture here is that parents sometimes come to complain about teachers to the principal when they are not satisfied with their children's progress. The principal does not seek our opinions, he blames teachers for everything. The principal always makes comments like, 'parents pay a lot of money to the school, so we need to be careful not to do things that would make them take their children to another school.'

In addition, the teachers believed that they are doing their best for the children within the constraints of their working environment, but this is often not acknowledged publicly as Darika explains: 'I am committed to my work, I provide a lot of support to the children which neither the principal nor the parents see'. Another teacher, Preeda, reiterated that 'It is not only about academic work, but a lot of work also goes into shaping the children's behavior and that is a big thing we should be commended for'. Gamon commented on the need for principals to develop an atmosphere where parents get to understand the complexity of inclusive practice and the amount of work teachers put into supporting every child rather than focusing only on academic outcomes.

> It is obvious that parents don't understand what goes on in the classroom. I don't blame them at all. I think if we are given the opportunity to talk freely with parents rather than the principal talking for us, parents will understand us the more. We need to be involved in discussion with parents, I think this is what we need for our work. Understanding can reduce the stress coming from parents.

The findings also suggest that teachers would love to have their voices heard during parent teacher meetings instead of the school leaders talking most of the time at meetings. Sunan, for example, echoed:

> I love working with the children, but it is frustrating if you have something to say during parent-teacher meetings, but the leaders take over the meeting and we become only listeners. Teachers have a lot to say that may help the school leaders, but rarely do we have the chance to make those contributions.

Another account on disheartening experience of leadership practice was given by Boonsri who stated:

> It was a very distressing experience when one day the principal stopped in the hallway and briskly escorted me to his office and heaped a lot of unwelcoming words on me without trying to understand my point of view. My voice doesn't matter all, he just went on and on with verbal attacks because a parent had complained about me. At that time, a teaching career had disappeared from my mind, it was the time I nearly quit.

The need for responsive leadership

The findings demonstrate teachers' desire for leadership that is responsive to their socio-emotional and professional needs. However, the leadership practices described by the teachers indicated that working together to develop and build environments in which all members of the school feel they belong, was absent. The teachers' concerns were related to the low status accorded them by their leaders, which placed them at receiving ends.

> We attend meetings with the principal. We make suggestions that we think, if implemented, would improve inclusive practice in our school. But our principal will take none of that. In Thailand, it is difficult to speak to your superiors or suggest something that will lead to big changes. As teachers we are directed and not always listened to and this is affecting our emotions, self-esteem and self-confidence. (Chimlin)

The data also suggest that while the teachers expressed a need for urgent support from their leaders to deal with inclusive practice challenges, the actions of their leaders suggest professional needs as having a lesser degree of attention than those of the children. However, the teachers believed that their professional needs must be met before they can adequately support all children in inclusive programs.

> My principal does not understand the challenges of the inclusive classroom environment. Even if we don't complain about our emotional needs, as a leader you need to seek to understand what's really happening in our classroom and to support our needs then we also can help the children. . . . it shouldn't be a fault-finding attitude. (Gamon)

It appears that the leaders have created institutional hierarchies that mitigate responsive engagement with their teachers. From the teachers' perspectives, responsive leadership was missing in action. Responsive leadership involves leadership practices that balance professional expectation with human dignity. Teachers in this study expected their leaders to show humanity, compassion, trust, and respectful relationship in their leadership practices just like they do to their leaders. The teachers particularly stressed the need for reciprocal respectful relationship when dealing with staff. Respectful relationship was described as key to responsive leadership, as Arinya's expression suggests:

> I have a lot of respect for my principal, I don't talk back at him and I expect that he will do the same. If you are a leader it means you are there to support those who support your work, leaders can't do it alone and teachers can't do it alone. We need each other to make things work well and that is why we must relate to one another in a respectful way. (Arinya)

The teachers' views indicated that although they received adequate supply of teaching resources, they often encountered challenges in implementing inclusive practices because of lack of responsive engagement from their school leaders. Other practice experiences include lack of comfortability in working collaboratively with the school leaders. Instead of the school leaders infusing leadership into teachers' day-to-day pedagogical practice to enable them act as pedagogical leaders, they were rather detached from the embodiment of the identity as leaders in the inclusive schools. Teachers emphasized the necessity of their leaders to listen and engage them in matters affecting their schools. Melee for example, said: 'I want my principal to hear me out . . . I am the one teaching the children and I know what is not working and what will make it work. If they make themselves

approachable, and if they trust us that may really make a difference, it will change everything'. Boonsri, another teacher described the rationale for responsive leadership as having to do with:

> *Meeting the professional needs of teachers in a timely manner and supporting them to work through their day-to-day challenges. It is about leading them, and not commanding them. When our principals show that they care, we also have the same care for the children.*

Furthermore, in their professional difficulties, the teachers drew on peer support to cope with their unmet needs which should have been provided by their leaders. For instance, Apinya stated:

> *If you have a problem that the leaders are not interested to hear anything about, you can turn to a friend to inspire you to continue working. I am comfortable asking for support from my friends than to talk about my problem to the principal. She is less interested, just want the job done.*

In fact, peer support was helpful to making these teachers respond to children's needs. A responsive leader acknowledges when the necessary tools and skills to handle a situation are not adequate, and seeks to build those skills, however uncomfortable that may be.

Discussion and implications

This study explored the perspectives of 15 Thai early childhood teachers who worked in inclusive private kindergartens to understand how leadership looks like, and how these teachers were experiencing it. The study was based on teacher voice and therefore, the findings are open to multiple interpretations. We believe that teacher voices on their leaders' leadership dispositions and practices are important for understanding the conditions under which the teachers were operating to teach young children with diverse needs in the Thai early childhood educational settings. The examination of the early childhood teachers' perceptions of their leaders provided a window into some leadership practices that support and/or created challenging working conditions for these teachers. Importantly, three themes emerged for discussion: *It feels like 'a place' but 'not a place, making every voice count*, and *the need for responsive leadership*. These themes together, constitute significant leadership dispositions that have implications for inclusive education in the early years. The results indicate that, in their attempt to provide education that meets the needs of children with diverse needs, teachers' professional practices were supported with adequate resources and yet, there were professional practice challenges due to leadership dispositions that marginalized the teachers. It can be explained that the supply of adequate resources may be linked to these kindergartens operating as profit making institutions and some of these profits may be challenged into teaching resources.

The findings indicated that the early childhood teachers were loaded with work and openly criticized for children's poor academic performance. This is consistent with findings from a previous study which found 'overt intolerance by the leadership team towards underperformance if evidenced in teachers' classroom data and pedagogical

practice' (Carter & Abawi, 2018, p. 12). Our study contributes to inclusive school leadership development by unpacking what needs to change in Thai private kindergartens to realize best-practice in inclusive education for all children.

It can be argued that when leadership is left to operate as authority and position, teachers may feel a sense of insecurity and disengagement (Ball, 2003). Being marginalized from decision making can lead to challenges in inclusive practice (Sharma & Desai, 2008). One interesting finding of this study is that, although the early childhood teachers were enthused by the presence of children with diverse developmental abilities, they had difficulty responding to children's individual differences and development needs. The teachers attributed this to work pressure imposed by their school leaders and lack of collaborative support.

Ryan (2006) argues, 'concentrating leadership power in a single individual is exclusive; those who are not considered leaders are left out of leadership related activities' (p. 8). Previous studies found that leadership focused on shared practice and responsive engagement contributes to inclusive practice (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). In this sense, it would be impractical to expect to create inclusive early childhood educational settings that support all children to thrive, while having teachers who frequently find themselves at the margins of their schools.

Our study revealed that teachers were concerned about their school leaders' leadership practices because they were ostracized from decision making in their schools. Previous studies have identified distributive leadership practices as key to shared thinking to address the challenges of inclusion and enhance professional practice (Lambrecht et al., 2020; Nilsen, 2017). This is opposed to leadership constructed as a command, which has negative consequences for teachers. For example, in this study, it was identified that some of the teachers in their quest to find comfort elsewhere due to pressure from their leaders, resorted to changing schools. This is counter-productive to children's development because studies found that young children in inclusive schools need secure attachment to develop their socio-emotional and executive function skills (Bernier et al., 2015; Blair & Raver, 2015). By implication, leadership is a critical requirement for schools to sustain teachers on the job and support all children to thrive (Crippen & Willows, 2019). To improve inclusive practice, teachers and school leaders need to value one another and bridge status boundaries. Being a leader means, having professional dispositions that balance respect with performance requirements, which can lead to responsive engagement with all members of the school's community (Carter & Abawi, 2018). Palaiologou and Male (2019) suggest that leadership must be conceptualized as a pedagogical praxis. In fact, when pedagogy becomes a central feature of leadership, teachers become part of the decision-making process in their schools.

This study draws our attention to the important role leadership dispositions play in developing inclusive early childhood education. It particularly points to the urgent need for leadership training in responsive leadership which is different from management. Lalonde (2013) argued that management type of leadership is characterized by the predisposition to direct people with inflexible routines. On the contrary, responsive leadership begins with governance and school administrative leaders who build their leadership practices on respectful relationships (Rodríguez et al., 2008). If early childhood education is to achieve the tenets of inclusive education which are enshrined in equity and social justice for all within a school's community, then school leadership must

not only focus on achieving school policy and financial goals, it must also consider critically, the leadership conditions under which teachers' professional works are situated.

Early childhood school leaders that overlook the pedagogical and socio-emotional needs of teachers have a little or no chance of developing and maintain quality early education for all children. Attenbaugh (2005) argued that 'Too long ignored, or patronized by policy makers, the teacher holds the key to a humanist process of schooling as well as permanent school reform' (p. 2). Thus, if we are to work toward quality early childhood education systems that include all children irrespective of their developmental vulnerabilities, we must first train principals to accord teachers respect and how to genuinely involve them in making strategic decisions in their schools about matters that affect their daily professional practice.

In this study, it appears that the participant teachers were very critical of their principals regarding how they experienced leadership in their schools. This reinforces Gozali et al.'s (2017, p. 44) finding that 'Teacher voice is not always kind, beneficent, or student-centred, . . . teacher voice can be biased, critical, and judgmental'. Despite this, teacher voice must not be treated with 'scorn'. Indeed, insider perspectives that emerge from teacher voice are beneficial in making improvements in early childhood inclusive education because voice they offer insights into contextual educational issues. Furthermore, teachers are those working directly with children with diverse needs daily, hence, they have more grounded insights into how leadership should operate to serve the interests of all children in their context.

In this regard, school leaders need to be trained on how to create a dialogic space where teachers can talk more and freely with their principals about school issues. When teachers feel welcome and their ideas are publicly acknowledged and celebrated, they would feel appreciated and valued thereby, responding warmly to children (Armstrong, 2006; Carrington et al., 2010). On the one hand, engaging teachers to see themselves as leaders often help them develop positive perceptions about inclusive education. On the other hand,when constructed as followers, teachers tended to adopt complaining attitudes about inclusive education (Blase & Anderson, 1995; Carrington et al., 2010; Carter & Abawi, 2018). Harris (2005), posits, 'leadership practice is like a group dance, where the interactions of the dancers rather than their individual actions allow us to understand what is taking place' (p. 14). The dance must be orchestrated in unity within diversity to advance all children's core capability skills.

Limitations of the study

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the sample is purposively selected from three private kindergartens that described their schools as inclusive and were willing to participate in the study. Thus, the sample may not be truly representative of all the private inclusive early childhood educational settings in Thailand. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized across the entire kindergartens in Thailand. Secondly, the use of interpretive lens opens the data to multiple interpretations and provides prospects for further research in this area. Future research can consider surveying the entire early childhood teachers to ascertain their views of their leaders' leadership practices.

Conclusion

The results of this study provide some insights into the leadership practice experiences of early childhood teachers who work in private kindergartens in Thailand. It appears, leadership is operating at the margins, creating barriers for the teachers' professional work. We recognize the urgent need to work with principals of private kindergartens through professional learning that focused on the roles of early childhood teachers in leadership so that collectively, they can identify how to better cater to the needs of all children. Finally, to understand and transform the current leadership practices, the cultural beliefs, and practices in which they are embedded in the Thai local context, for example, hierarchical relationships (Brooks, 2015), need to be carefully interrogated. It is through such deliberate acts of a desire to change the status quo that new standards for responsive and respectful leadership practices can be developed and implemented to serve the whole inclusive early childhood community.

Disclosure statement

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