

# Establishing Inclusion for SEN in Faith-based Schools in Thailand: A Case Study

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## Abstract

In Thailand, research on inclusion program predominantly focused on inclusion programs in government-run schools. The need to understand specific inclusion of students with special needs (SEN) within faith-based settings cannot be neglected. This study addresses this gap by investigating the processes by which diverse faith-based schools in Thailand foster the inclusion of students with special needs. Through in-depth interviews with nine participants and observations from two faith-based schools, a case study was employed, incorporating within-case and cross-case analysis. Findings reveal that faith-based schools established inclusion models aligned to the schools' mission statements and values. Inclusive practices were open communication, parental involvement, teachers' collaboration, and specific inclusion strategies such as accommodation and modification, as well as celebrating diversity and inclusion. Barriers to inclusion include lack of knowledge, skills, and training in inclusion. Further research on the long-term influence of faith-based schools' values on inclusion practices and the quality of life of SEN can enhance global understanding of faith-based approaches to inclusivity.

*Keywords:* disabilities, inclusive education, faith-based schools, mainstream, case study

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## 1. Introduction

The global population of people with disabilities is increasing that there are almost 240 million children with disabilities worldwide. One in ten children lives with a disability, and 49% of them never attended school (UNICEF, 2022). People with disabilities face inequitable conditions such as stigma, discrimination, poverty, and exclusion from school (WHO, 2023). These children continue to experience isolation and neglect due to multiple challenges (UNESCO, 2021; Dorabawila et al., 2022). To address these problems, inclusive education has been widely implemented and practiced in many countries.

Thailand has been actively working towards inclusive education. The government has established the National Committee for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities and the "Elimination of Unfair Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act," to protect the rights of students with special needs (SEN) and inclusion of people with disabilities (Srisom et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2021). Several studies in Thailand explored the attitudes, experiences, challenges, and inclusion practices, aiming to eliminate barriers for individuals with disabilities and empower leaders in the development of inclusive education (Trory & Sharma, 2019; Narot et al., 2019; Meindl et al., 2020).

Despite Thailand's commitment and movement towards inclusive education, many children with disabilities are still placed in specialized facilities rather than mainstream classrooms, limiting their access to inclusive education (UNICEF, 2021; Uttayotha & Scheef, 2021). Ladaphongphatthana's report (2021) found that a number of children with disabilities are placed in institutional care and private organizations – the most common intervention in Thailand. Interestingly, 64% of these private organizations are Christian, despite Christians being just 1.2% of the population. Additionally, Uttayotha and Scheef (2021) included Catholic and private educational institutions as key collaborators in a strategic plan to achieve inclusion success in Thailand.

Since faith-based schools are part of private educational institutions, this raises intriguing questions about their potential to promote inclusive education and reduce exclusion of children with disabilities. Several studies about

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inclusive education in faith-based schools have emphasized a more in-depth study of the deeper matters concerning inclusive education to discourage the exclusion of students with special needs (Joseph, 2020; Uttayotha & Scheef, 2021; Kivirand & Leijen, 2022; Kamran et al., 2023). There is a dearth of research regarding the status of inclusion of special needs in a faith-based setting. This gap leaves the education system in Thailand without a comprehensive study about inclusion in faith-based settings.

Therefore, this study explored how processes in faith-based settings have helped in facilitating inclusion of students with special needs.” The sub-questions are: (1) What were the processes that faith-based schools in Thailand employed towards the establishment of inclusion programs for those with special needs? (2) What are the current best practices of faith-based schools in Thailand for the inclusion of students with special needs? (3) What are the challenges that these faith-based schools experience in sustaining the inclusion of students with special needs?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

A multi-case study design was used to explore the multifaceted landscape of inclusion for students with special needs within faith-based schools in Thailand (Yin, 2018). Examining multiple cases will allow for the uncovering of hidden nuances, shared challenges, and unique triumphs in navigating inclusivity amidst religious values and traditions. This in-depth exploration, grounded in the lived experiences of diverse stakeholders (Merriam, 2020), examined the complexities of two faith-based schools in establishing inclusion programs for students with special needs (Eisenhart & Howe, 2009).

### 2.2. Participants

Using purposive sampling until data saturation was achieved, a total of nine participants from two faith-based schools were interviewed. Creswell and Poth (2018) considered purposeful sampling as a means where an inquirer chooses individuals or sites that can truly represent the phenomenon under investigation or the problem. Two school from different religious affiliations are recognized by government for accommodating students with special needs. Five teachers, one psychologist, two Special Education Coordinators, and one principal met the inclusion criteria of having at least one year of experience in handling special needs students (*ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, and other related learning disabilities*) in a faith-based school. The participants’ profile is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participants of the Study

School Number	Religious/Sec	Participants	Participants’ Profile
School A	Seventh-day Adventist school	Participant 1	Teacher
		Participant 2	Psychologist
		Participant 3	Teacher
		Participant 4	Teacher
		Participant 5	Special Education (SEN) Coordinator
		Participant 6	Principal
		Participant 7	Special Education (SEN) Coordinator
School B	Christian school	Participant 8	Teacher
		Participant 9	Teacher

### 2.3. Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. Using open-ended questions, the interviews were focused on the context from which inclusion program were established. The best practices and challenges in designing programs for students with special needs were also explored. Interviews were audio-recorded, and transcripts were produced for member checking. Additionally, school and classroom observations were conducted with the informed consent of participants to explore how teachers implemented the inclusion practices and programs.

### 2.4. Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research, ethical guidelines were strictly followed. All participants were asked to provide informed consent, ensuring that they understand the goal of the research and their rights. The study sought the approval from

the Ethics Review Board (ERB) of the Adventist University of the Philippines before initiating any data collection activities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### 2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a framework by Morse (1994): comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and recontextualizing. During the initial comprehension stage, coding techniques adapted from Miles and Huberman (1994) facilitated a thorough understanding of the data within each case. Subsequently, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify common themes, enabling comparisons and insights into broader patterns and trends (Eisenhardt, 1989). The stages included synthesizing findings within cases, developing explanations for identified patterns, and finally, recontextualizing bridged the findings to the existing literature on inclusivity in schools. NVivo 14 software ensured comprehensive data management throughout the analysis.

### 2.6. Researcher’s Reflexibility

My background as a Special Educational Needs (SEN) educator offers valuable insights, but also presents potential bias. To mitigate this, I employed a flexible interview approach with SEN teachers and administrators. This approach allowed the conversation to flow organically, with me following up on interesting points raised by the participants and tailoring my questions to their specific experiences. The research journey itself shaped my methodology. Initially, intending thematic analysis, the data led to adjustments that allowed for a deeper, more comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon.

### 2.7. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the qualitative data was achieved by utilizing multiple data sources beyond interviews, such as field notes and school documents/reports related to inclusive practices. Additionally, a comprehensive audit trail was documented, detailing the research setting and interviewer reflections. Analyzing this diverse data set alongside interview transcripts provided a richer and more holistic understanding of participants' experiences within their faith-based schools. Validity of the participants’ responses were achieved through member checking. Table 2 shows the triangulation matrix that link between the research questions and other data sources.

**Table 2.** Triangulation Matrix linking the Research Questions and Data Sources of this Study.

Research Question (RQ)	Data Source 1	Data Source 2
RQ 1: What were the processes that faith-based schools in Thailand employed towards the establishment of inclusion programs for those with special needs?	In-depth Interviews Field notes	Literature
RQ2: What are the current best practices of faith-based schools in Thailand for the inclusion of students with special needs?	In-depth Interviews Field notes	Literature
RQ3: What are the challenges that these faith-based schools have in sustaining/maintaining the inclusion of students with special needs?	In-depth Interviews Field notes	Literature

## 3. Results and Discussion

The themes presented here represent the results drawn from the data sources collected from the interviews, field notes, and audit trail notes. Before the themes are presented, a brief description of each school is narrated to place this study in context. The major themes and their sub-themes are discussed based on the research questions.

### 3.1. Case 1 - School A

School A, a Christian school in Bangkok, Thailand, was established by a Seventh-day Adventist with a vision to nurture students with God's love. Rooted in Adventist Christian principles, the school emphasizes wholistic education, focusing on mental, physical, social, and spiritual growth. The school's commitment to its Christian mission extends to the inclusive education program. The school believes that every child has the right to learn, so a program was developed, inspired by the experiences and commitment of the former head of the school. Today, a dedicated Special Education Needs (SEN) department offers different programs to ensure students receive the appropriate level of support for their individual needs. Until now, the Special Educational Needs program has welcomed students with learning support needs in close collaboration with mainstream classes.

### 3.2. Case 2: School B

School B is a private Thai international school founded by Christians who desire to be an evangelism arm for Christian professionals to use the educational platform for cross-cultural ministry in Thailand. Knowing the power of God's love in the owners' lives, they had the vision of providing a bilingual early year's center that opened doors for foreign teachers to share the grace of Jesus through education. Over the past 30 years, this vision has continued to evolve. The founders remain actively involved in program development, which has led to the establishment of a Special Needs Program. Two years ago, the head of the school, formerly a missionary, initiated the creation of this program because of a Christian commitment. The school believes that as Christians it is our duty to provide this support to children with special needs. Until now, school B continues to build a strong foundation that helps students grow into determined, compassionate, and inspirational individuals.

### 3.3. Processes of School for Inclusion

Participants of schools A and B were asked about processes that their faith-based school in Thailand employed towards the establishment of inclusion programs for SEN students. Data analysis revealed two themes: alignment of programs with values and SEN models. Table 3 shows the summary of themes and data sources.

**Theme 1: Alignment of Programs with Values.** Owner's and designated school head's value orientations. The school owner's value orientation revolves around nurturing students with God's love. For example, the school leader's first-hand experience with caring for and loving her child also with special needs served as the foundation of inclusion activities. Teachers must design programs that will fulfill the values of the owner and school leaders. Faith in God motivates many Christian schools to engage more in special education and that faith resulted in the establishment of the programs. Christian school should be a community that is open to all children, regardless of their capabilities, backgrounds, or handicaps (De Muynck, 2019). The school requires a better understanding of how to align these Christian principles and mission with implemented practices to ensure inclusivity (Ramirez & Stymeist, 2019).

**Theme 2: SEN Models.** Participants of schools A and B revealed two programs that were established to address inclusion of those with special needs. Schools A and B identified these as program models called pull-out and push-in.

**Pull-out model.** Faith-based schools use similar programs to support SEN students in smaller classes focused on core subjects. Pull-out program targets students struggling with core subjects such as Math, English, and Science, yet still follows the mainstream curriculum, in a simplified manner. SEN students are pulled out but after lunch, the students are integrated into mainstream classes with middle school students, supported by support staff. Classroom pull-out, or "resource room," involves separate instruction for students who need individualized support in subjects like math and reading/language arts (Reifler, 2020). Although pull-out programs help optimize the abilities of both special needs and typical children (Salpina & Putri, 2023)

**Push-in Model.** Both schools implement a push-in model. Push-in program involves students who can be in the mainstream classroom for the whole day but require additional support from the teacher and the homeroom teacher. Both schools affirmed that there are benefits of this program. Push in model is implemented where support services and resources are integrated into the general education setting instead of removing students with disabilities for specialized instruction (Jain, 2023). Research found that this program improved social skills, especially among special education students, through interaction with peers in general education, yielding significant social and emotional benefits (Cchiaro, 2023) which are evident in both schools.

**Table 3.** Processes Facilitating Inclusion in Faith-based Schools in Thailand

Themes	In-depth Interviews	Fieldnotes
Alignment of Inclusion Programs with School Values	<p>“We fulfill our mission of helping not only a few students but all, including those who cannot learn as others do.” (Participant 6, School A)</p>	<p>The school has a chapel for student devotionals, Bible verse posters in the SEN classroom, and practices prayer before classes.</p>
	<p>“Our school mission is to help all students.” (Participant 7, School B)</p>	<p>The school had a playground equipped with sensory materials to ensure that SEN students alongside other students could benefit from the learning space.</p>
<b>SEN Models</b> Push-in Model	<p>“The Push-in program helps students with extra support join regular classes, making sure everyone feels included and belongs.” (Participant 4, School A)</p>	<p>The school has buildings from A to Building E, which include both mainstream and SEN student rooms.</p>
	<p>“Push-in helps the students in learning in the mainstream class.” (Participant 7, School B)</p>	<p>The rooms were very accommodating to SEN students. Space was provided where students could regulate themselves away from peers with the help of support staff.</p>
Pull-Out Model	<p>“Pull-outs are SEN students who are struggling with academics, specifically the core subjects.” (Participant 1, School A)</p>	<p>Participant 1 (interviewed in SEN classroom) showed instructional materials designed for students with special needs, including modified worksheets, for reference during the discussion.</p>
	<p>“Pull-Out is taking the students out of their general education classroom at a certain time for individualized or small group instruction (Participant 9, School B)</p>	<p>The rooms for pull-out sessions were small enough to accommodate one to three students. The school utilized sensory and Montessori materials.</p>

### 3.4. Best Practices for the Inclusion of SEN

School A and B have shared their own best practices in handling SEN students. Themes that emerged from the data analysis were open communication, parent involvement, and teacher’s collaboration. Table 4 presents the summary of themes and data from interviews and field notes.

**Theme 1: Open Communication.** Both schools prioritize open communication within their stakeholders. Communication between parents and the school teachers of both schools focused on behaviors, learning progress, and learning goals of SEN. This open communication with parents is crucial for successful resolution of behavioral issues. Communication between parents of students with special needs and their teachers is crucial in the student’s educational journey. Research has revealed that parental involvement positively affects grades, motivation, behavior, and attendance (Wahyuni & Mangunsong, 2022; Alnoaim & Alharbi, 2022).

**Theme 2: Parental Involvement.** Each school emphasize the importance of parental support. Parents are invited to attend meetings to review inclusion guidelines and policies. These meetings include discussions about the child's progress, adjustments to the support plan or individualized education program (IEP). Parent and guardian participation in the special education decision-making process is important because their involvement in these processes raise awareness about SEN. As the parents possess a comprehensive understanding of their own child, it is important to be consistently involved throughout the child’s school career development (Logsdon, 2022).

**Theme 3: Teachers’ Collaboration.** Both schools emphasize collaboration in implementing inclusion practices. Teachers and staff collaborate in designing accommodation and modification strategies fit to SEN. Collaboration happens between teachers, teachers and guidance counselors, and teachers with other non-teaching personnel. Collaboration among educators is crucial in implementing inclusive practices within schools (Paju et al., 2022).

Teachers play a central role in achieving inclusive education by ensuring that the learning environment addresses the special educational needs (SEN) of all students (Sannen, et al., 2021). Strengthening collaboration between Special Education (SEN) and mainstream teachers was crucial for improving teaching effectiveness in inclusive education, as emphasized by Paires & Mandal (2023) and Razalli et al. (2020).

**Table 4.** Best Practices for Inclusion of SEN

Themes	In-depth Interviews	Field Notes
Open Communication	<i>“We maintain open communication with mainstream teachers and parents to address any specific needs or areas requiring attention for the IEP goals.” (Participant 3, School A)</i>	<i>The school shares anecdotal records, progress reports, and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) with parents and middle school teachers to monitor students' progress.</i>
	<i>“The teachers are very understanding and have open communication with parents. This allows parents to address any issues directly with their children.” (Participant 8, School B)</i>	<i>The SEN teacher communicated with the mainstream teacher to log the student's classroom behavior report. At the end of class, this report was placed in the student's bag to be shown to parents.</i>
Parental Support	<i>“Parents can witness their development, progress, and improvement. Though it takes time, it's worth the patience.” (Participant 6, School A)</i>	<i>Participant 6 shared some photos of events featuring SEN students and parents watching. She recounted personal experiences, becoming emotional (teary-eyed) while emphasizing this positive development.</i>
	<i>“Parents address any issues directly with their children even at home to maintain consistency” (Participant 7, School B)</i>	<i>After a class, the SEN teacher turned over the SEN student to the parents' watches, providing them with the learning diary (daily report) and discussing homework to be completed at home.</i>
Teachers' Collaboration	<i>“We're not entirely separate departments. Instead, they merged the Guidance and SEN departments for better collaboration for our SEN students.” (Participant 2, School A)</i>	<i>The guidance office is located near the SEN rooms so that children with behavioral problems can be quickly assisted. The school has a bulletin board with an organizational chart where the guidance and SEN teams are grouped together in one department.</i>
	<i>“The teachers and staff at the school are collaborating to tailor practices by making accommodations and modifications.” (Participant 9, School B)</i>	<i>The mainstream teacher promptly communicated with the Special Educational Needs (SEN) staff about the lesson and activity to be done before the class started. She also provided a printed copy with visuals to make it easier for the SEN student to understand.</i>

### 3.5. Specific Inclusive Strategies

In addition to general inclusive practices, Schools A and B revealed specific inclusion strategies used by teachers in their classes. In mainstream classrooms, teachers practice accommodation and modification and celebration of diversity and inclusion. Table 5 presents a summary of the themes and data elucidating these themes.

**Theme 1: Accommodation and Modification.** Schools A and B use accommodation to and modification strategies to support SEN students especially in the mainstream classroom.

Comprehensive training in accommodations and modifications for general education teachers and paraprofessionals, as highlighted by Malm (2019), enhances students' educational experiences. Without proper support, barriers such as anxiety, disengagement, and frustration may lead to challenging behaviors in school (Watts, 2021). Overcoming these barriers then requires modifying and differentiating lessons. Magableh & Abdullah (2020) and Jinja & Chen (2020) underscore the importance of differentiated instruction by teacher educators in diverse classrooms, enhancing motivation and fostering better relationships between learners and educators.

**Theme 2: Celebrating Diversity and Inclusion.** Schools promote inclusivity by celebrating diversity, empowering all learners, and breaking down barriers. Recognizing everyone's uniqueness fosters an equitable environment where every triumph is acknowledged. By challenging stereotypes and fostering acceptance, schools cultivate a sense of belonging for all students. Acknowledging the accomplishments of students with SEN educates about special education's importance and promotes inclusiveness in communities (Hanson, 2023). Prioritizing equity and inclusion safeguards children from harm and is vital for the long-term success of those with special needs (Forde, 2023).

**Table 5.** Specific Inclusion Strategies in Mainstream Classrooms of Schools A and B

Themes	In-depth Interviews	Field notes
Accommodation and Modification	<p><i>“For example, if the teacher assigns 10 items for an activity, MS teachers could assign 3-5 for our SEN student.” (Participant 2, School A)</i></p> <p><i>“If I have a student who dislikes writing, I coordinate with the mainstream teacher to find alternative approaches. We discuss options like allowing the student to draw instead of writing, with the understanding that the writing can be completed later.” (Participant 8, School B).</i></p>	<p><i>The mainstream (MS) teacher asked if the student needed more time to finish the task. The student said no, so the task was handed over to the support staff to continue during small group sessions.</i></p> <p><i>The Special Educational Needs (SEN) staff was having difficulty assisting the child in regulating their behaviour in the room. So, the mainstream (MS) staff offered her own space (table) at the back for the child to work there, ensuring a quieter environment for better focus.</i></p>
Celebration of Diversity and Inclusion	<p><i>“Our student with ADHD, who regularly attended counseling sessions, now in college, successfully passed the university entrance examination and visited the school to share his achievement.” (Participant 2, School A)</i></p> <p><i>“For our kids to join mainstream classes is already a success story, and seeing our students who have difficulty expressing themselves and cannot utter a single word but now can say their name or a few words, is a huge triumph for us.” (Participant 7, School B)</i></p>	<p><i>During the interview, the participant showed the school's Facebook page to showcase the student highlights that featured their success stories before.</i></p> <p><i>Participant 7 became emotional, with tears in her eyes, while sharing a student's success story. They shared photos of themselves with the student and emphasized that they had become closer.</i></p>

### 3.6. Challenges of Teachers in Inclusion

School A and School B have two challenges that they need to overcome to sustain inclusion programs. Table 6 presents a summary of the themes and data from interviews and field notes.

**Theme 1: Lack of Knowledge and Skills.** Both Schools A and B confessed that teacher lack knowledge and skills in helping students with special needs. This critical gap cripples SEN in their full participation and transition to mainstream classrooms (Bonfiglio & Kroh, 2019). This aligns with research highlighting the importance of well-trained mainstream teachers in inclusive settings (Aksu Ataç & Taşç, 2020). Encouragingly, both schools acknowledge this need and are actively developing their programs, demonstrating a commitment to addressing this challenge and ultimately enhancing the learning performance of SEN (Smith, 2020).

**Theme 2: Lack of Training.** Schools A and B identified demonstrated critical lack of training, especially for mainstream teachers, as a major barrier to including SEN students in mainstream classrooms. Both schools aim for mainstream transition, but inadequate training hinders full participation and integration. This aligns with Ramirez & Stymeist (2019) who highlight the need for private Christian schools to offer training in specific, research-based approaches for SEN education. Inclusive education addresses barriers, but challenges like resource limitations and outdated training persist (Magumise & Sefotho, 2020). Importantly, both schools acknowledge the need for improvement and are actively developing their SEN programs.

**Table 6.** Challenges of Faith-based Schools in Inclusion

Themes	In-depth interviews	Field Notes
Lack of Knowledge and Skills	<i>“One of the challenges we face is that regular teachers often don't know how to accommodate SEN students in the MS classroom” (Participant 5, School A)</i>	<i>During the class, the mainstream teacher asked the support staff to teach the lesson to the students right away instead of modifying it themselves.</i>
	<i>“Some MS teachers didn't want to change and didn't always know the best ways to help SEN students.” (Participant 9, School B)</i>	<i>During a task, the mainstream teacher doesn't want the student to ask for help from the support staff even when it's really needed. The SEN staff then stayed just at the back of the room.</i>
Lack of Training	<i>“We need more extensive training. Being a support teacher is challenging, especially when the MS teacher struggles to handle SEN kids in the classroom” (Participant 2, School A)</i>	<i>The school calendar and events only have professional development (PD) sessions for each department separately. There's no PD session about Special Educational Needs (SEN) for the entire school.</i>
	<i>“More training for the whole school because not all people are open to this kind of program.” (Participant 7, School B)</i>	<i>The participant indicated that in the school events, only one seminar is scheduled and there are no seminars or training sessions for handling Special Educational Needs (SEN) posted in the events.</i>

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

While previous research on inclusion in Thailand's education system is limited, this study specifically focused on faith-based schools. It investigated the processes used to establish inclusion programs, current best practices, and the challenges faced in maintaining inclusion. The key findings revealed that both schools employed a SEN program aligned with the school values. Open communication, parental support, teacher collaboration, and inclusive strategies were identified as best practices. Specific inclusion strategies unique to both Schools were accommodation and modification and celebrating diversity and inclusion. However, a lack of knowledge, skills, and training emerged as a common barrier. This study paves the way for further exploration of inclusion in Thai faith-based schools. Future

research can examine the role of faith in shaping these practices and analyze the long-term impact of inclusion programs, offering valuable insights to enrich knowledge and guide efforts toward truly inclusive educational environments. Further research may consider the lived experiences of students with special needs and their quality of life after graduation from faith-based schools.

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