

## EXAMINING THE ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS WITHOUT DISABILITIES: AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

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**Abstract:** *Introduction. Attitude of regular students towards peers with disabilities may influence social welling of students with disabilities in mainstream settings.*

*Objectives. This research aims at examining the attitudes of Grade 7 and Grade 8 students in Australia and in Thailand towards peers with disabilities and comparing the differences between the two countries.*

*Method. One hundred forty-two Australian students and 48 Thai students responded to the Attitudes of Students Towards Disability questionnaire with 58 items, examining three domains of attitude (i.e., cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains).*

*Findings. The Australian student group had more positive attitude towards peers with disabilities than the Thai student groups on all the three domains of attitudes. However, both groups had moderately positive attitudes with the average scores of 78% for the Australian student group and 68% for the Thai student group.*

*Conclusion. Social and cultural context may influence students' attitude towards peers with disabilities. Further qualitative research is needed in understanding the responses of the students and in promoting positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities.*

**Keywords:** *Attitudes, Disability, Inclusion*

### INTRODUCTION

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities seeks member states to provide education for students with disabilities within the mainstream education environment, stating that persons with disabilities should have access to “inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live” (Article 24). Many member states are working with schooling sectors towards the intent of the Convention. As a result, differing countries are making considerable gains in ensuring students with disabilities are provided with an education with in the mainstream settings. In Thailand, for example, the number of students with special needs attending regular schools increased from around 70,000 students in 2012 to 240,000 students in 2015 (Office of the Education Council, 2013, 2016). The number reflects Thailand’s success in providing access for students with disabilities to education in mainstream settings. However, the challenge of the country now is to ensure that the education provided for students with disabilities in mainstream settings is of high quality and responsive to both the students’ learning and social needs.

The nature of school community attitudes (e.g., administrators, teachers, and peers) can have a powerful

influence on the outcomes of inclusive education (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; de Boer, Timmerman, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012). Hogg and Vaughan (2005) define attitudes as “a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols”(p. 150). While attitudes of adults in school community, such as administrators and teachers, have been extensively researched, it is the attitudes of peers that receive limited attention.

Attitudes of students without disabilities towards their peers with disabilities have been found to positively relate to the social participation of students with disabilities (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012). In a review of 20 studies on attitudes of primary school students towards peers with disability in seven countries, de Boer et al. found that students generally had neutral attitudes towards peers with disabilities. Although studies on the attitudes of secondary school students are more limited, it has been revealed that culture may influence the attitudes of regular students towards peers with disabilities.

In a qualitative study of attitudes toward 12 students, aged 13-15, in Moldova, McLean (2017) revealed that negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities could be due to culturally specific conception of disability.

Siperstein, Parker, Norins and Widaman (2011) conducted a survey of 4059 middle school-aged students, aged 12-15, in China on their attitudes towards students with intellectual disability and found that Chinese students had conflicting ideas about inclusion of students with disabilities. The reason could be that while Confucianism taught Chinese students to be sympathetic, they needed to meet academic demands for opportunities to study higher education.

This study, therefore, aimed at examining the attitudes of secondary education students (i.e., Grade 7-8) towards peers with disabilities across two countries (i.e., Australia and Thailand). The questionnaire was specifically designed for the Grade 7-8, taking international social and cultural context into consideration. In understanding the attitude of students in the two countries, both countries can learn from one another in making societal changes in order to improve social acceptance of persons with disabilities.

## METHOD

This section describes the method of this study, including measures, data collection, procedure, and participants.

### Measures

The questionnaire used was the Attitudes of Students Towards Disability, consisting of 3 parts: basic information (i.e., age, and gender), experiences with disabilities (16 items), attitudes towards peers with disabilities (58 items). Using yes-no questions, the questionnaire assesses three domains of attitudes with: cognitive (33 items), affective

(14 items), and behavioral domain (11 items). The questionnaire takes approximately 20 minutes to respond.

### Procedure

After obtaining University ethics approval, and permissions from schools and parents, the teachers gave the questionnaires to the students. The students were informed that their participation was voluntary and they did not have to respond to the questions that they did not want to. The teachers collected the questionnaires and return them to the researchers.

### Participants.

The participants of the study were Grade 7 and 8 students in Australia and in Thailand aged between 11 and 14 years. The data collection in Thailand took place in a regular school, under the jurisdiction of Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, providing education for students from kindergarten to Grade 9. There are two classrooms for each grade. One out of the two classrooms from each grade was randomly selected and all the students were given the parental consent forms but only those whose parents gave the permission were given the questionnaires.

The total of 156 Australian students and 48 Thai students responded to the questionnaire. However, in the Australian student group, there were 14 cases with more than 5 missing data on the attitude items, which could influence the total scores. Therefore, the cases were removed, reducing the number of participants in the Australian group to 142 students.

Table 1 – Basic Information on the Participants of the Study

		Australia		Thailand	
		frequency	Percent	frequency	Percent
Total		142		48	
age	11	5	3.5	0.0	0.0
	12	46	32.4	12	25.0
	13	69	48.6	25	52.1
	14	22	15.5	11	22.9
gender	male	95	66.9	23	47.9
	female	47	33.1	25	52.1

Most of the Australian students (90.8%) and the Thai students (93%) indicated that they were aware of disability and that they knew someone with a disability (70.4% of the Australian students and 70.8% of the Thai students). School was where the largest percentage of both the Thai (36.6%) and the Australian students (43.8%) had met a person with disability. The majority of both the Australian (73.2%) and the Thai students (60.4%) had talked to someone with a disability.

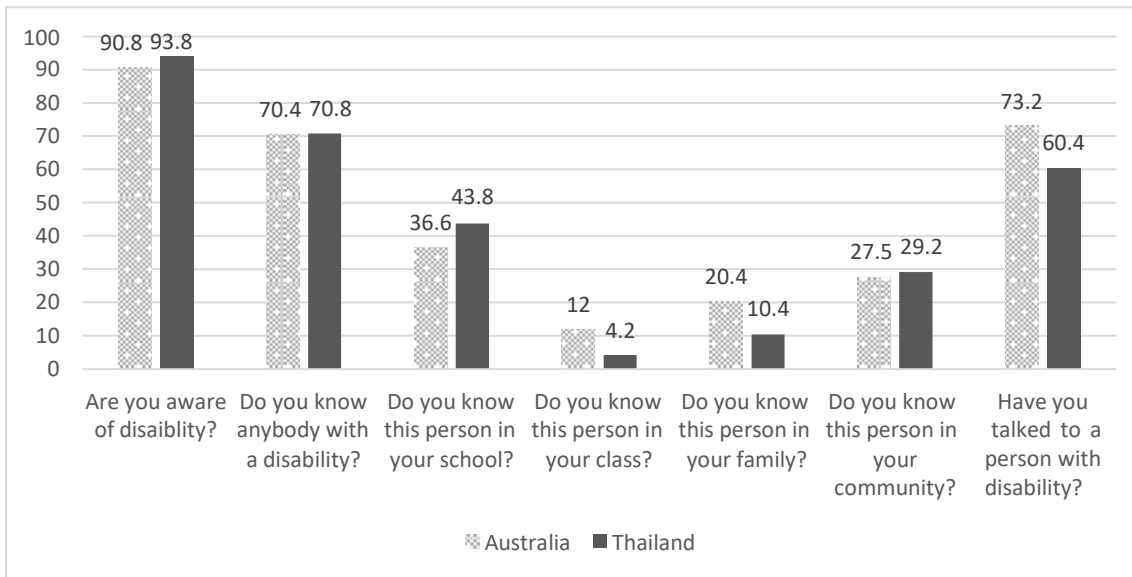


Figure 1 – Direct Experiences with Disabilities

Most of the students had indirect experiences with disability (0.1% of the Australian students, 0.6% of the Thai students). While television was where the largest number of the Thai students had indirect experiences with

disability (85.4%), the largest number of the Australian students indicated that their indirect experiences with disability was through talking to their families (66.9%).

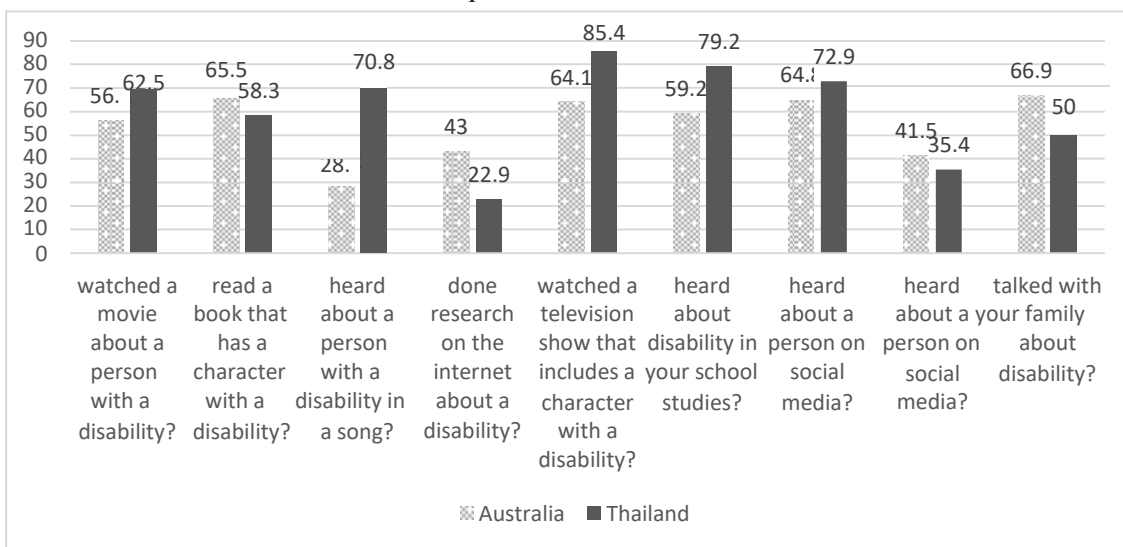


Figure 2 – Indirect experiences with disabilities

## RESULTS

Each positive response was given the score of 1, while negative response was given the score of 0. The positive response for positive statement is “Yes”, but the positive response for negative statement is “No”.

**The total score.** The average scores of the three domains of attitudes ranged from 70%-80% with the total score of 78% in the Australian students group, and from 62%-70% with the total score of 68% in the Thai students.

Table 2 – The Total Scores of the Australian Student Group and the Thai Student Group

	Total (58)		Cognitive (33)		Affective (14)		Behavioral (11)	
	Australia	Thailand	Australia	Thailand	Australia	Thailand	Australia	Thailand
Mean	45.29 (78%)	39.48 (68%)	25.52 (77%)	23.08 (70%)	11.15 (80%)	8.65 (62%)	8.62 (78%)	7.75 (70%)
SD	8.58	8.50	5.00	4.98	2.84	2.99	2.15	2.58
Median	48.00	39.48	27.00	24.00	12.00	9.00	9.00	8.00
Range	16-56	14-53	7-31	11-30	3-14	0-13	2-11	1-11

### Comparison of the mean scores between the two groups.

In comparing the total scores between the Australian student group and the Thai student group, Man-Whitney tests were used as the total scores for both groups were not normally distributed. Both the K-S tests and the Shapiro-Wilk tests were significant at  $p < .001$ . However, the Levene's test indicated the homogeneity of the variances between the two groups ( $p > .05$ ). It was found that the mean score of the Australian group (Mdn = 48) was significantly higher than the Thai group (Mdn = 41),  $U = 1970.50$ ,  $z = -4.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $r = -0.32$ .

MANOVA was used in comparing the scores on the three domains of attitudes (i.e., cognitive, affective, and behavioral) between the Australian and the Thai student groups. According to Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010), the major assumptions for MANOVA are the independence of observations, normality, the absence of outliers, homoscedasticity, linearity and the absence of multicollinearity. In examining the data, it was found that the data met all the above assumptions except the multivariate normality. Transformation of the data did not improve the multivariate normality for the Thai student group. Therefore, the untransformed data were used in the analysis. However, the interpretation of the results must be done cautiously.

All the four multivariate statistical tests generated by SPSS (i.e., Pillai's Trace,  $v = .95$ ,  $F(3, 186) = 9.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Wilks' Lambda,  $\Lambda = .871$ ,  $F(3,186) = 9.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Hotelling's T,  $T=148$ ,  $F(3, 186) = 9.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Roy's Largest Root,  $F(3,186) = 9.2$ ,  $p < .001$ ) indicated that there was a significant difference in the Australian and the Thai group on at least one domain of attitudes towards students with disabilities.

Man-Whitney was used in performing univariate analyses as the scores on the three domains for both the Australian group and the Thai group were not normally distributed ( $p < .05$ ) and the transformation of the scores (i.e., square root, log, reciprocal) did not improve the normality of the scores for any of the groups. The Levene's test indicated homogeneity of the variance of between the two groups on all the three domains ( $p > 0.5$ ). It was found that the scores for the Australian group were higher than the

Thai group significantly on all the three domains of attitudes which were cognitive domain ( $U=2337$ ,  $z = -3.261$ ,  $r = -.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ), affective domain ( $U = 1,724$ ,  $z = -5.15$ ,  $r = -.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and behavioral domain ( $U = 2680$ ,  $z = -2.241$ ,  $r = -0.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

### Comparison of each item between the two groups.

In the cognitive domain, the statements that the lowest percentage of both the Australia and the Thai students gave positive responses are "I think you have to be careful about what you say when you talk with a student with disability" (9.9% of the Australian students and 16.8% of the Thai students) and "I feel sorry for a student with disability" (9.2% of the Australian students and 4.2% of the Thai students). The largest difference between the Australian student group and the Thai student group is on the statements "I think that students with disability should go to a special school" and "It would be best for students with disabilities to work and live in special places". Sixty three point four percent of the Australian students and 12.5% of the Thai students gave positive response to the first statement, and 67.6% of the Australian students and 14.6% of the Thai students to the latter.

In the affective domain, the students were to select "Yes or No" to the adjectives describing their feelings when a student with sit next to them in class. The largest difference between the Australian and the Thai students is on the adjective "pity". The 61.3% of the Australian students and 8.3% of the Thai students gave positive response.

In the behavioral domain, the largest difference between the Australian and the Thai student is on the statements "Would you like to spend time with a student (of your age) with a disability outside of school?" and on "to continue with my work" in answering the question on how they would react if a student with disability come in to the class and sit beside them. Sixty one point three percent of the Australian students and 25% of the Thai students gave positive response to the first statement, while 88.7% of the Australian students and 35.4% of the Thai students gave positive response to the latter.

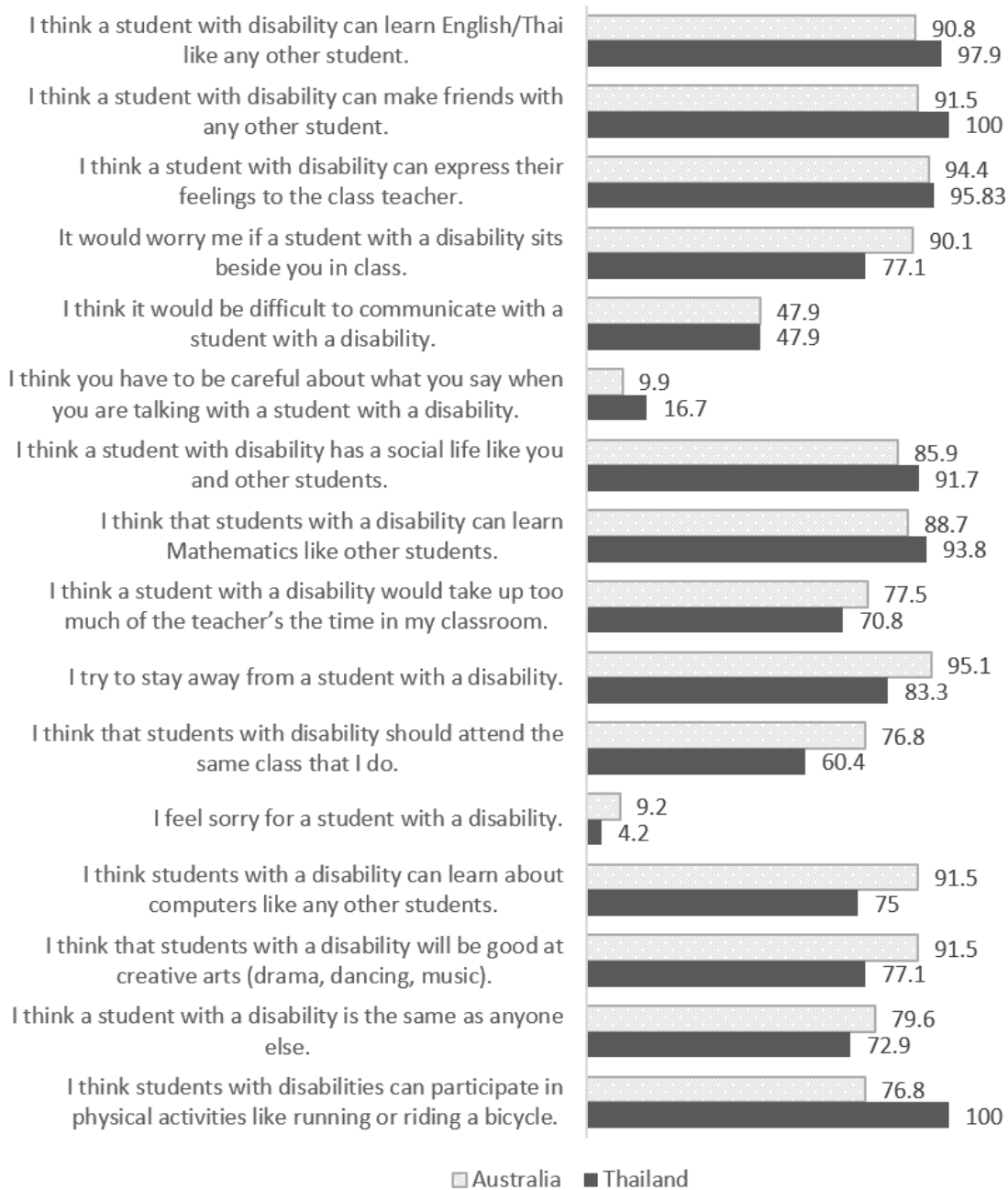


Figure 3 – Cognitive domain of attitude towards peers with disability

**DISCUSSION**

The Australian student group score higher than the Thai student groups on all the three domains of attitudes. However, it is important to further explore the reasons of the students in giving such responses and further qualitative research may be needed. Vibulpatanavong (2017) found that a Thai primary school student said no when asked

whether he would sit with a student with learning difficulty in class, but the reason the student gave was that he himself was not very good at studying, and students with learning difficulty should sit with someone else who could help them better.

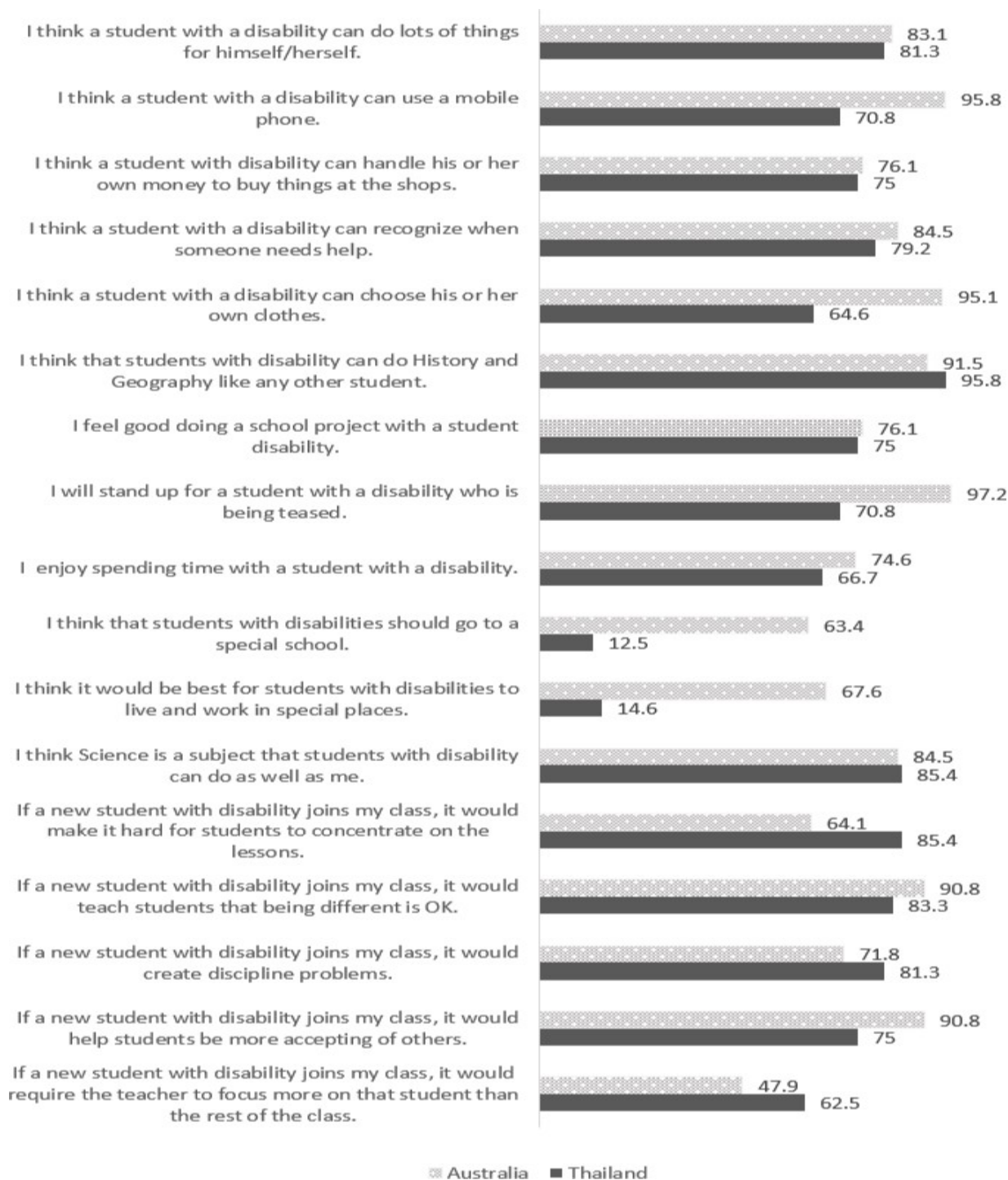


Figure 4 – Cognitive domain of attitude towards peers with disability (continued)

A substantial higher number of the Australian students than the Thai students gave positive responses (No) to the statement “I think that students with disability should go to a special school” and “It would be best for students with disabilities to work and live in special places”. This could reflect inadequate understanding of Thai students that being in mainstream settings has benefits towards students with disabilities and that with appropriate adjustments and supports, the needs of students with disabilities can be met in mainstream settings. However, in considering the situation in Thailand where teachers receive limited support in meeting diverse needs of students in

mainstream classrooms, the students who gave negative responses (Yes) may have positive intention towards peers with disabilities, thinking that the needs of students with disabilities may be better met elsewhere. While students’ attitude towards peers with disabilities can influence the success of inclusive education, the finding of this study may suggest that the success of inclusive education may also influence students’ towards peers with disabilities. If students have opportunities to experience that the diverse needs of all students with and without disabilities can be met in mainstream settings, they may respond more positively to having persons with disabilities learning or working in mainstream settings.

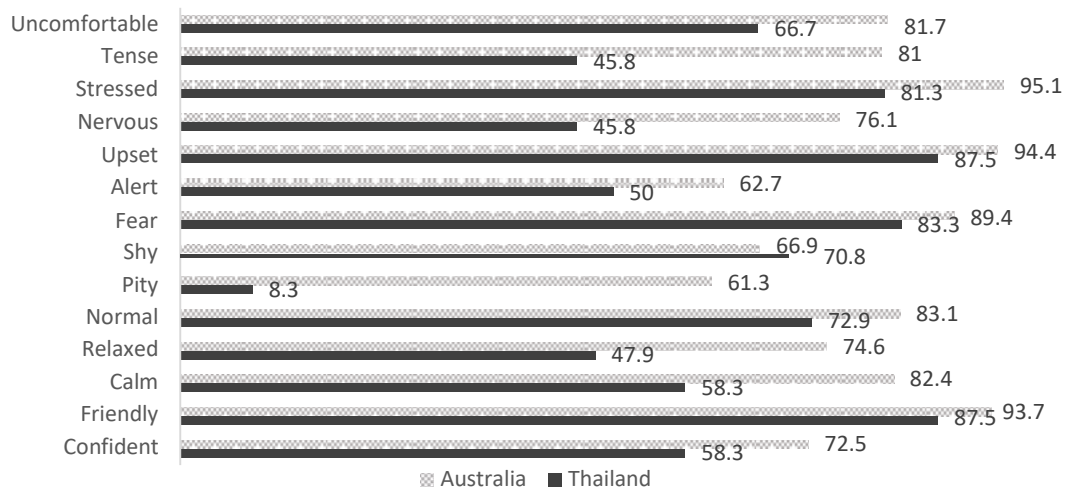


Figure 5 – Affective domain of attitude towards peers with disability (How would you feel if a student with disability, the same age yourself, sits beside you in class?)

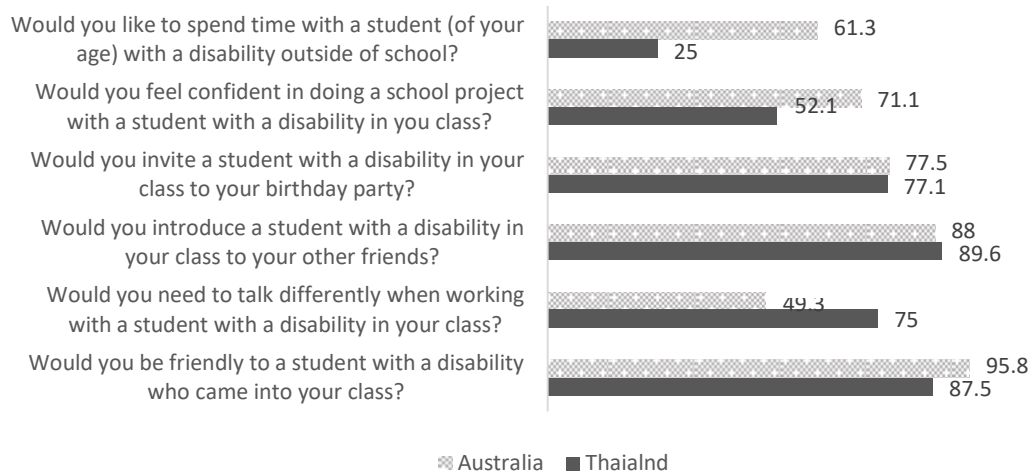


Figure 6 – Behavioral domain of attitude towards peers with disability

How would you react if a student with a disability in your class came and sat beside you?

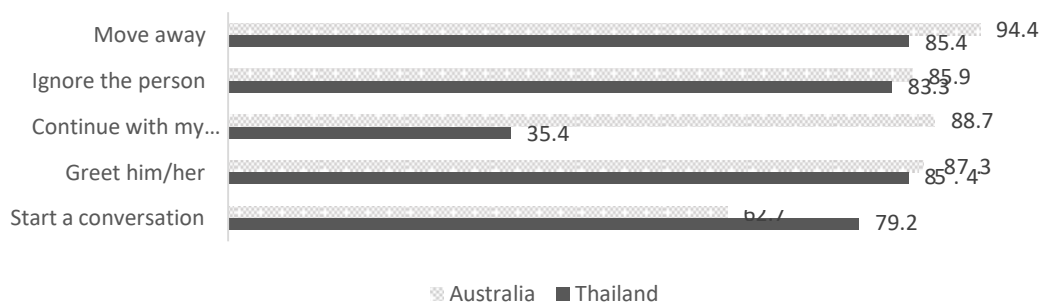


Figure 7 – Behavioral domain of attitude towards peers with disability (continued)

Only 8.3% of the Thai students gave positive responses by responding *No* to feeling *pity* for students with disabilities, while the 61.3% of the Australian students gave the positive responses. This could be due to the translation of the word *pity* into the Thai word *songsarn*. The word *songsarn* is widely used in everyday conversation in Thailand with persons in difficult situations or persons who are less fortunate than the speaker. *Songsarn* can be interpreted as compassion in Buddhism, but it can also be interpreted as “pity”, depending on the context (Kilbort-Crocker, 2012). All of the 21 non-disabled interviewees in the study by Naemiratch and Manderson (2009) expressed *songsarn* towards persons with disabilities. Vibulpatanavong (2017) found that sometimes Thai students were taught to feel *songsarn* and to help their peers with disabilities. While *songsarn* may lead Thai people to support persons with disabilities, it also may imply that persons with disabilities are of lower status. The challenge in Thailand may not be reducing the feeling *songsarn* towards persons with disabilities, but encouraging Thai people to feel *songsarn* without thinking that persons with disabilities as of lower status, making the word *songsarn* more similar to the word *compassion* than *pity*.

This research compared attitudes of the Australian and the Thai students towards peers with disabilities. However, the different sample sizes between the two groups may affect the strength of conclusions that can be made between the two groups. In addition, further research using qualitative methods is needed in understanding reasons behind the students’ response and in developing plans for promoting positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities.

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