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CLASDISA – Classifications of Disabilities in the Field of Education in Different Societal and Cultural Contexts: Insights Into the Current State of Research

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The research project *Classifications of Disabilities in the Field of Education* (*CLASDISA*) investigates which environmental factors facilitate or restrict activity and participation of 8- to 12-year-old children with disabilities[4] in the field of education in different societal and cultural contexts. The following report about this international research project provides insights into the research design, the first phase of field research, and the projects' current progress with an emphasis on research activities in Thailand. Given that previous research pertaining to education and disability in Thailand has been rather unsystematic and fragmentary, particularly qualitative research (Cheausuwantavee, Nookaew, & Cheausuwantavee, 2010), this study aims

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4 Deviations due to severe disabilities or late schooling of children might occur within the sample.

to identify and describe factors that are influencing children with disabilities in Thailand's capital more thoroughly.

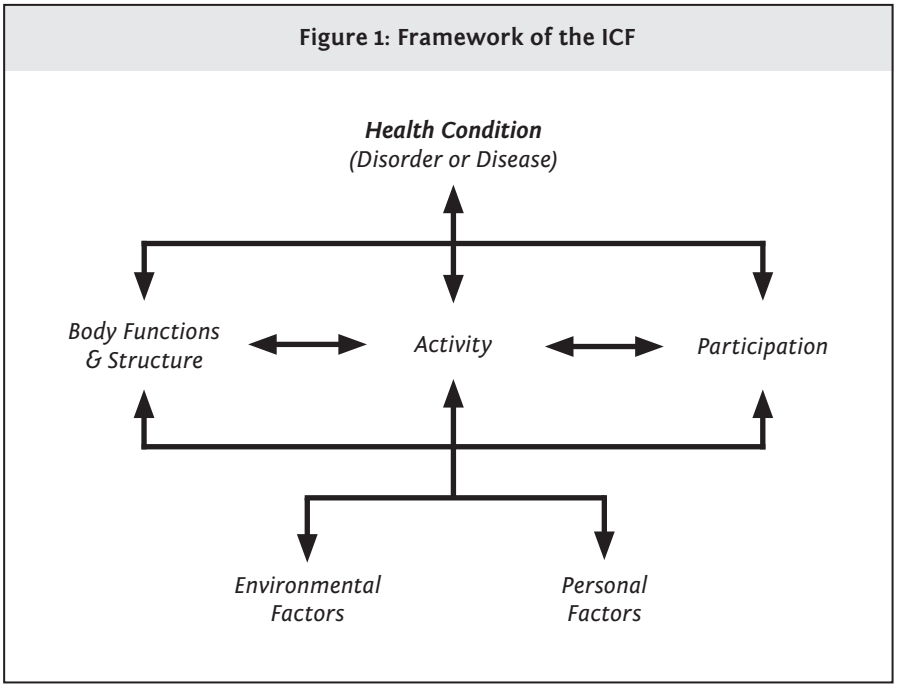
Background of the Project and Research Focus

How disability is conceptualised and defined differs over time and varies in different societal and cultural contexts. Classifications and their underlying models of disability have implications for professional practice and support systems, and determine political decision-making processes, legislation, and policies. Underlying assumptions about what constitutes a disability have important consequences in the field of education.

> *Thus, the daily lives of people with disabilities, if and how they are educated, if and where they work, and their social and familial life, in large part are determined by models of disability. Perhaps, most important, models of disability exert a powerful influence on the public perception of disability and the public's response to people with disabilities. (Smart, 2009, p. 3)*

The *International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health* (*ICF*) is based on a biopsychosocial model of disability. Thus, disability is not just regarded as a medical condition of the individual in need of treatment and rehabilitation, but also as a social phenomenon. Contextual factors, such as the physical environment and attitudes towards people with a disability, play an important role. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Framework of the ICF



Source: WHO, 2001, p.16

Based on the *International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health, Children and Youth Version* (*ICF-*

CY), which was released by the *World Health Organization* (*WHO*) in 2007, the *CLASDISA* researchers address barriers and facilitators for activity and participation of children with disabilities at schools in the capitals of Austria, Ethiopia, and Thailand.

The rationale for choosing the different countries is based on their varied cultural and societal contexts (different religions, values, beliefs, and institutional and structural factors) as well as varied economic and developmental backgrounds (according to the *Human Development Index*). The decision to select these three countries was also based on already existing contacts to respective Special Needs Departments and the prospect of efficient cooperation.

Following two years of preparation, the research proposal for the project was rated as excellent in the course of the *Austrian Science Fund*'s (*FWF*, project number P22178) review process, which in turn led to three years of financial funding. The research project started in February 2010 and will end in January 2013.

A team of three researchers from the University of Vienna conducted the first phase of field research. Each focused on one of the capital cities and was supported by research assistants in Thailand and in Ethiopia. Besides cooperation with local scientific teams from the Department of Special Education at Srinakharinwirot University in Bangkok and from the Department of Special Needs Education at the University of Addis Ababa, two experts in the field of special needs education, Lani Florian from the University of Aberdeen and Judith Hollenweger from the School of Education at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences, support the research process. Research workshops will be held after each phase of field research involving all researchers associated with the project.

Methodological Framework

The empirical data for this study will be collected in the course of two phases of field research, lasting three months each, and undertaken simultaneously in the three capitals: Bangkok, Addis Ababa, and Vienna. Data collection is supposed to result in a sample of 16 'cases', each case consisting of one child, one parent/legal guardian/(primary) caretaker and one teacher. The children's disabilities must be allocated to one of the following disability categories:

1. Visual disability
2. Auditive disability
3. Physical disability
4. Intellectual disability

By using a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Clark, 2007), qualitative research based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is complemented by data gained quantitatively (i.e. questionnaires for parents and teachers). The development of research instruments draws on the *ICF-CY*'s chapter on environmental factors. The *ICF-CY* is a coding instrument that is supposed to be universally applicable, a claim that is at times challenged by researchers (Üstün et al., 2001).

> *The unit of classification is, therefore, categories within health and health-related domains. It is important to note, therefore, that in ICF persons are not the units of classification; that is ICF does not classify people, but describes the situation of each person within an array of health and or health-related domains. (WHO, 2007, p. 8)*

Several authors have stressed the relevance of the *ICF-CY* regarding classifications of disability (Florian & McLaughlin, 2008). Based on the *ICF-CY* and assumptions about what affects activity and participation, the researchers developed interview and observation guidelines as well as questionnaires for the first phase of field research. Through interviewing children, teachers, and parents, the researchers aim to gain insight into micro-, meso-, and macro-systems affecting children with disabilities in terms of their educational biographies, including the societal and cultural conditions they are confronted with.

Furthermore, the project includes three innovative aspects. First, the research project investigates relations between society, culture, disability, and education. Second, it is applying the *ICF-CY* in the field of education, including a critical examination of this classification system. Finally, during the research process, adequate research methods are developed through international scientific cooperation in the field of special needs education. The latter includes the development of adapted methods for interviewing children with disabilities.

Aside from interim and final project reports, the research is intended to result in four doctoral theses, three focusing on the individual countries, as well as one in

which quantitative results are to be summarised and compared.

Current Localisation

Figure 2: Methodological Framework - 3 Phases of Research

Source: Authors

The development of instruments for qualitative and quantitative data collection was complicated by the language diversity in each of the societal and school contexts. Questions regarding quality assurance arose while the intended research instruments initially had to be translated from German into three other languages (English, Thai, Amharic). The research team in Vienna developed instruments in German and translated them, with support of a native speaker, into English. The research teams in Thailand and Ethiopia translated the questionnaires, interview guidelines, and informational materials from English into Thai and Amharic. This step was followed by retranslation (from Thai and Amharic into English) by professionals in order to ensure quality and consistency (van de Vijver & Hambleton, 1996). Overall, these linguistic issues pose substantial challenges for the development of research instruments and research implementation as well as for the process of data analysis.

After the *pre-testing phase*, the *first phase of field research* took place in Thailand, in Ethiopia, and in Austria. Currently, qualitative interviews are being translated and qualitative data from the three countries are being prepared for computer-based analysis. The processing of quantitative data, which was collected during the *first phase of field research*, is nearly completed. In addition, a methodological framework as well as research instruments for the *second phase of field research* are being developed.

Reflections on Research in Bangkok

The research team in Thailand established initial contacts with schools and organisations during a visit to Bangkok in June and July 2010. In Bangkok, almost all of the targeted schools and institutions offered support and showed interest in the research and its findings, even though the framework of the study, to many of the experts and parents involved, appeared highly complex. Only two institutions postponed or denied cooperation. Overall, 92 interviews were conducted and 124 questionnaires were collected at 15 institutions during the first phase of field research between November 2010 and January 2011. The local partners' support in regard to interviewing, translating, and organisational tasks was very helpful.

Researchers observed a tendency that teachers expected them to interview either the least disabled or best students in their classrooms. The relevance of targeting a wide variety of children including those with severe disabilities had to be explained several times. Interviewing children with a wide range of disabilities and filling in a complex questionnaire with parents, who are in part nearly illiterate, posed particular challenges. This led to discussions within the research team in Thailand as well as with colleagues working in Ethiopia and in Austria. It appeared that the time and resources for filling in questionnaires had been underestimated, given that nearly half of the parents needed support due to either not understanding the questions or to limited reading or writing skills.

During the first phase of field research most participants spoke and understood Central Thai or a close dialect. However, occasionally a sign language interpreter supported the research team in Thailand. Starting mid-November 2011, the research team aims to interview as many of the persons as possible who had already participated in the first field research phase for a second time. Also, interviews with additional experts and more observations in classrooms are planned. Questions for this second phase will be developed based on data analysis of the first round of data collection. It will be further investigated and discussed whether research materials might need to be translated into other languages apart from Thai and English (such as those of migrant workers).

Only broad indications relating to further research foci can be given at this stage of the research process. Since the analysis of the data has not been completed, it is

inherent in the methodology of grounded theory that researchers avoid premature conclusions and progressively generate new theoretical concepts and insights (Charmaz, 2006). Still, an initial assessment of the empirical data at hand implies that, among other issues, the relevance of religion and belief in a transitory society (Taylor, 2003) and their impact on understanding disability and attitudes towards people with disabilities (Miles, 2002) needs to be explored in-depth. For example, data from the first phase of field research in Thailand suggests that almost all parents interviewed sought counselling or support from monks or institutions of worship at some stage during their child's development. In addition, the relevance of particular educational policies and current developments in inclusive schooling are to be further examined.

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