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**EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES FOR IMPROVED
QUALITY OF LIFE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY
OF TWO VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION
TRAINING CENTERS**

Ploy Suebvises

**A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of
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Associate Professor *Suchitra Punyaratabandhu* Committee Chairperson
(Suchitra Punyaratabandhu, Ph.D.)

Associate Professor *Juree Vichit-Vadakan* Committee
(Juree Vichit-Vadakan, Ph.D.)

..... *Kanittha Deventukdi* Committee
(Kanittha Deventukdi, M.A.)

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation : Empowering People with Disabilities for Improved Quality of Life: An Exploratory Study of Two Vocational Rehabilitation Centers

Author : Ms. Ploy Suebvises

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People with disabilities pose a dual challenge to society. Development depends on, among other things, human resources. It is in the interest of a society that its people with disabilities have the best physical, psychological, and intellectual conditions possible so that their ability to contribute to development is maximized. Also, measures should also be taken to ensure that people with disabilities enjoy the benefits of development, broadly expressed as improvement in quality of life.

Vocational training is one means by which people gain skills that allow them to contribute to development. By working, people with vocational skills should be able to make efforts to improve their quality of life. It is, therefore, of interest to consider vocational training programs for people with disabilities. The idea of empowerment is also of interest because research suggests that it plays a role in both the success of vocational training for people with disabilities and the quality of life of people with disabilities.

Given this context, the present study has three objectives: (1) to compare and contrast vocational training services for people with disabilities provided by public and private organizations in Thailand; (2) to examine the extent to which the activities of these vocational training organizations potentially contribute to empowerment and quality of life of people with disabilities; and (3) to devise policy recommendations concerning the management of Thailand's state-owned vocational rehabilitation training centers.

This study employed qualitative research methodology to examine the operation of Yard Fon Vocational Rehabilitation Center in Chiang Mai Province,

which is supervised by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, and the private sector Redemptorist Vocational School for the Disabled in Chon Buri Province. Participant observation and interviews with staff, trainees, and graduates of the two institutions were used to form a picture what services were offered, how those services were delivered, and how people with disabilities were affected by the training.

From the research results, it is justified to conclude that the vocational training services of both institutions led to improvement in the graduates' quality of life. By Western assessment guidelines, neither center exhibited strong empowerment mechanisms, although the Redemptorist School for the Disabled had a higher level of empowerment practice than did Yard Fon Vocational Rehabilitation Training Center. Both centers shared some "charity-based" service characteristics that could be considered disempowering. Nevertheless, trainees of both centers reported feelings consistent with being empowered, and their quality of life generally appeared better, objectively and subjectively, after graduation than before the training.

Results suggested that public and private training centers could improve their performance by systematically recognizing and supporting the empowerment of people with disabilities. State-operated vocational training centers could take several measures to improve the effectiveness of their services and increase empowerment practice. The training centers' goal—specifically provision of just basic social skill or vocational training—should be defined more clearly. Existing centrally-devised training programs should be redesigned to better reflect labor market demand and address the needs of people with disabilities. If the centers are to continue to focus on vocational training, graduates must leave equipped with a higher degree of professional competence. A better post-graduation job-placement and ongoing support mechanism is also needed. More generally, the government should also improve the basic education of people with disabilities so they have a foundation for vocational training. Ongoing professional development for rehabilitation personnel would be advantageous, and rehabilitation personnel should change their attitudes towards disabled trainees by adopting the empowerment approach. Finally, service provision by people with disabilities, in other words having disabled staff members, could significantly enhance the empowerment of people with disabilities.

DEDICATION

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Although this dissertation is part of the fulfillment of my Ph.D. degree, the dissertation topic reflects my commitment to conduct a study about people with disabilities. This commitment springs from my work for the Ratchasuda Foundation and Ratchasuda College, two organizations under Her Royal Highness's patronage that work for people with disabilities. This work is one humble way of showing my appreciation to Her Royal Highness for her gracious support. In my heart I will always cherish the kindness and attention I received.

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