1. Introduction

The typical image associated with children with disabilities in Vietnam is one of abnormality and helplessness. This stigma is just one of the many ways by which these children continue to be marginalized. Because the general public believes them to be incapable of doing anything, children with disabilities are excluded from every aspect of life. They do not have adequate healthcare; they do not have friends; they do not have educational opportunities. Without access to schools, these children are robbed of crucial life skills and knowledge, which leads to lack of job opportunities and the inability to fully participate in the society when they are grown. This of course only reinforces the stigma against people with disabilities as a whole and especially the unfortunate children.

In order to stop the vicious cycle of marginalization, the society must intervene as early as possible through an effective inclusive education system. Inclusive education allows children with and without disabilities to be educated in the same setting where adjustments are made to fully accommodate the needs of the students with disabilities. Such a system will empower children with disabilities to maximize their potential and prove to all that they are just as capable as any other children. Inclusive education is recommended globally for children with disabilities, and it already receives policy support in Vietnam. Although much progress has been made in developing and implementing inclusive education, challenges remain across the country.

The first challenge in implementing inclusive education is the lack of accurate data on disability that is up to date and consistent with the requirements of the 2010 Law on Disability. Without supporting figures, many claims about the pressing situation of not just children but all people with disabilities have been ignored. Many people continue to underestimate the needs of children with disabilities for education.

This underestimation means that not enough attention is being paid to educating teachers about inclusive education practices. Inclusive education is rarely covered in teacher training programs, and most information about inclusive education spreads through small scale workshops and short-term courses. Lack of knowledge about inclusion also means that schools are reluctant to admit students with disabilities. There is an urgent need to develop the human capacity to implement inclusive education at local levels.

Furthermore, officials in charge of programs for children with disabilities are often confused because the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs take different and inconsistent approaches. Whereas the Ministry of Education and
Training has been fully committed to inclusive education since 2005, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs institutionalizes children with disabilities and provides them with segregated education. In order to fully integrate these children into society, the two ministries must collaborate more effectively, not with just each other but also with other stakeholders, such as teachers and parents, to address the needs of children with disabilities.

Above all, unless the general public changes its perception of people with disabilities, meaningful progress to building an inclusive society without barriers for all will be limited. Vietnamese people must reconsider certain practices that they have always taken for granted, even the ‘gift culture’ where benefactors make a one-time visit to an institution in celebration of Tet (the Lunar New Year) or Children’s Day and present books and toys to children with disabilities. These common actions, though well-meaning, only further marginalize people with disabilities. It is the same with education for children with disabilities: most of these children are fully capable of participating in a normal classroom with their peers; they neither need nor deserve to be reduced to mere objects of charity at the time of Tet.

2. Background

The first section of this report describes the risks of marginalization and poverty that children with disabilities encounter and the traditional views of disability that lead to discrimination. The next section explains why inclusive education is the answer to this problem. The policies supporting inclusive education are then briefly summarized to provide the legal context for inclusive education in Vietnam. The fourth section describes the progress and challenges in implementing inclusive education policies. The report concludes with three examples of how inclusive education is being practiced in certain parts of Vietnam.

I became interested in the needs of children with disabilities after volunteering in a special center for autistic and disabled children in Hanoi in 2010. This institution, despite its relative popularity with donors and volunteers, is always in great need of more resources and support. The teachers are burdened with overcrowded classes; there are not enough toys and educational materials appropriate for the disabilities; above all, there is a constant sadness in the eyes of teachers, parents, and even the children themselves. For many of these disabled children, an inclusive education alongside those without disabilities is entirely possible. Many countries with highly developed support systems for people with disabilities have been practicing inclusive education for a long time. Thus I decided to explore the current state of inclusive education in Vietnam and its effectiveness in responding to the needs of children with disabilities.

Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training committed to the vision of inclusive education for all in 2005, and it approved a Special Decree on inclusive education for children with disabilities in 2006. In 2010, the Law on Persons with Disabilities reaffirmed the Government of Vietnam’s commitment to providing educational access to all by recommending inclusive education for all children with disabilities who are able to benefit from it. With the legal and policy framework supporting inclusive education more or less in place, we must now address other questions. How are the policies being translated into action? What are the
achievements that Vietnam has made and what challenges remain to be solved? How far are we from full inclusive education for children with disabilities?

In search of answers to such questions, in June 2013 I visited several support centers for inclusive education and other institutions supporting children with disabilities in Vietnam. I was able to interview many parents, teachers, and disabled children about their needs and hopes for the future of special needs education. Their invaluable inputs, in combination with existing written resources, helped me construct an accurate snapshot of inclusive education practice for children with disabilities in Vietnam. This paper is designed to be an introduction to inclusive education in Vietnam for those who seek a more systematic and sustainable way to support children with disabilities and are wondering where to start. The answer is inclusive education – the one area where even the littlest change we make can unbolt the gates and allow children with disabilities to live a life of dignity, self-reliance and inclusion in society.

3. Children with Disabilities and Public Awareness

3.1. Children with Disabilities

The Law on Persons with Disabilities 2010 defines people with disabilities as follows:

Persons with disabilities by definition of this Law are those who have impairment of one or more parts of their body, or functional impairment, which are shown in different forms of disability, and may cause difficulties in work, daily life and learning. (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2010)

Currently, there is no official national disability rate in Vietnam. Different surveys provide different figures, and lack of accurate data is a common issue in the country. For example, the 2009 Viet Nam Population and Housing Census used a set of questions based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) framework. By this standard the Census found that 7.3 % of Vietnamese have impairment in one or more of the following areas: vision, hearing, mobility, and cognition (UNFPA, 2011). This is drastically different from the 15.3 % figure produced by the 2006 Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey (NCCD, 2010). This discrepancy can be explained by differences in the definitions of disabilities and the wording of the survey questions (for example, questions based on the ICF framework do not cover all types of disabilities). Whether it is 7.3 or 15.3 %, Viet Nam’s disability rate is among the highest in the region, possibly because of the lingering effects of the war when the defoliant Agent Orange was sprayed over 10-15 % of southern Vietnam. Millions of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians were exposed to the dioxin-contaminated Agent Orange and other herbicides, and due to the return home of demobilized soldiers and civilian migration, these people have spread to all regions of the country. Dioxin, a contaminant in Agent Orange, is a toxin that degrades slowly and is linked to ill-health and birth defects even decades after the war has ended (Aspen Institute, n.d.).

According to the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, 1.3 million people with disabilities are children between the age of 5 and 18 (NCCD, 2010). Physical disabilities, mental disabilities and hearing impairments are the three most common groups.
For children with disabilities (CWD), exclusion from society starts early. According to the 2009 Census data, only 66.5% of CWD age 6-10 attend primary schools, whereas the national rate is 97.0%. Even for those who do go to school, the current system is not equipped to provide an appropriate education and many CWD only repeat grades until they are too old for general education. Drop out is also a serious issue, with about 33.0% of all CWD who have been to school dropping out at some point. Gender is another problem that must be addressed; according to a 2007 report by Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences on education for CWD, 55.5% of girls never once attended school; the figure for boys is 39.0% (NCCD, 2010).

Lack of education means lack of job opportunities and meaningful connections with the community in the future. In urban areas, people with disabilities are four times more likely to be unemployed than people without disabilities (UNFPA, 2011). This only serves to perpetuate the idea that people with disabilities are useless to the society. Stigma becomes a vicious cycle that people with disabilities cannot escape, creating a solid barrier that prevents inclusion. Unfortunately many CWD grow up with the same beliefs as other people – that they are incapable of doing anything and the society, by giving them gifts and stipends, is already doing everything it can to support them. However, the occasional gifts and monetary stipends do not redress the widespread poverty among people with disabilities. According to MOLISA, 31% of households with one member who is disabled live in poverty, and this number rises to 63% for households with three disabled members (MOLISA, 2006). This is the type of future to which Vietnamese children with disabilities are destined.

3.2. Changing Public Perspective: From Charity-based to Rights-based

The struggles of disabled children and people with disabilities as a whole are partly the results of long-held misconceptions about the nature of disability. Children with disabilities often appear in the media in two roles. The first calls attention to the compassion of some organization or agency displayed by generous gifts to these unfortunate children. Rarely does the question of systematic support going beyond the temporary gifts get raised. With this type of portrayal, it is not difficult to understand the tendency to view children with disabilities (and the entire disabled community) as inferior people who can never become ‘just another person’ contributing to the society.

The second type of story features children with disabilities who have found academic success and are brimming with hope for a brighter future. Though these articles appear less frequently than those of the first type, they are by no means rare, and are exemplary models of determination and hard work. One example is the story of Nguyen Huu Toan. Toan stood out against his fellow students at the university entrance exam testing site as a volunteer slowly pushed his wheelchair to where his mother was waiting. Affected by Spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) from a young age, Toan had never been able to walk on his own two feet. Instead, for the past 12 years, his mother had pushed him by wheelchair to school every single day, and now to the rigorous university entrance exam that for Vietnamese students signifies life or death. His father is a motorbike driver for hire, his mother a laundress, and money is always short for this
family of five. Despite the hardships, Toan’s mother was determined to let him go to college, because that is the only way that this family can dream of a change of fortune. ¹

Despite the good intentions of both types of stories, this kind of media coverage only reinforces traditional misconceptions about disability. These articles mainly emphasize the differences and not the similarities between children with and without disabilities, implying that the disabled child is indeed abnormal. There are several approaches to defining disability and related issues, but the beliefs of most Vietnamese people seem to belong to the Charity Model and/or the Medical Model of Disability.

The Charity Model sees individuals with disabilities as helpless people who need special services in order to function in daily life. People with disabilities are considered pitiful, and according to this model, charity is the only way to help these unfortunate people. In fact, 98% of the community believes that disabled people are to be pitied (ISDS, 2011). It is also often believed that disability is the fault of the individual, resulting from misdeeds in a past life.

The Medical Model also considers disability as a personal problem that needs to be cured. The notion that people with disabilities are abnormal or flawed is implied within this perspective. Similar to the Charity Model, the Medical Model emphasizes special institutions to provide special treatment, education and occupations for people with disabilities.

Both of the models above view disabled people as the problems that need to be fixed. However, disability is very much a social issue; society itself has created the many barriers disabling these people and preventing them from equal participation in life. As a result, what need to be fixed are not people with disabilities but the society and the way it is organized to exclude people with disabilities from participation. This approach is called the Social Model.

To build upon the Social Model, clearly many people with disabilities would have just as much potential to succeed as any other person if given the right care and opportunities. In fact, this is perfectly within their basic rights as human beings. This is the Rights-based Model of Disability which emphasizes the inclusion of people with disabilities in society and guaranteeing them the right to equal opportunities and participation in society. This is the model that every society should strive for if it wants to ensure that people with disabilities receive a life of self-reliance and dignity.

Here are some examples of the four Models of Disability mentioned above:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Charity Model</th>
<th>Medical Model</th>
<th>Social Model</th>
<th>Rights-based Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young woman using a</td>
<td>“What a pity, this beautiful woman is bound to a wheelchair, she’ll never</td>
<td>“Oh, this poor woman, she should go to a doctor and discuss with him if there</td>
<td>“The community really should build ramps in front of public buildings, so that</td>
<td>“When she gets a job, her employer will have to build accessible rooms. This is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wheelchair</td>
<td>be able to marry, have”</td>
<td>is a therapy which could enable</td>
<td>persons like her can participate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ (Me day xe lan dua con den truong thi, 2013)
| Man with an intellectual disability | “Look at this poor confused man; he seems to be mentally retarded, it would be better for him to live in a foster home, where somebody will take care of him.” | “Perhaps there is some medicine or treatment which could improve his perception. He should try a psychiatrist.” | “It’s a good situation that he lives with his brother, so he is surrounded by non-disabled people.” | “Where does he want to live? Let’s go ask him!” |
| Parents with a hearing-impaired daughter | “It must be very sad having a child and knowing that she will never be able to live on her own.” | “I’m sure in a few years there will be a hearing aid available which will make this child able to hear better.” | “We should all learn sign language, so that we can communicate with this child and all other hearing-impaired people.” | “When this child grows up, she’ll study at university if she wants to.” |

(HI, n.d.)

In general, the Vietnamese society still only considers disability from a charity and/or medical perspective, and as such stigma and discrimination continue to be a threat for people with disabilities. In reality, a self-reliant life with dignity based on human rights is entirely possible for people with disabilities. People with disabilities are fully capable of working and contributing to the economy. Children with disabilities are fully capable of going to school and playing with other supposedly ‘normal’ children. In fact, their physical impairments only fuel the determination to succeed and prove that children with disabilities can study as well as or even better than children without. Ignoring that potential would only lead these children to a life of poverty and loneliness, and it would also mean that the entire community has lost a valuable force. The rights of children with disabilities should be protected by building an inclusive, barrier-free society for all people, with and without disabilities.

As inclusion or exclusion is determined from an early age, the foundation of such a society must be a quality education system that allows for the participation of all children regardless of their physical characteristics.

4. Theory of Inclusive Education

In recent years, the general movement in education for CWD around the world has been pushing toward inclusive education – letting CWD study in the same classrooms as typically developing children. This is a major step in the development of special needs education, where segregation and specialized schools had been the norm for many decades. In 2006, the UN ensured international recognition of inclusive education by adopting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in which Article 24 declares:
With a view to realizing this [right to education] without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

- The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
- Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society. (UN, 2006)

So far, the Convention has had 155 signatories and 132 parties. Vietnam was the 147th country to sign the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and it plans to ratify the Convention in 2014.

When the issue of educational opportunities for children with disabilities was first raised in the nineteenth century, educators were content to place these children in special needs schools. These schools were completely separated from normal schools, with teachers trained in working with special needs children and resources (curricula, infrastructure, etc.) developed specifically for handicapped children. Some educators, parents and interested parties still believe this form of special needs education to be more effective than inclusive education. For example, it is sometimes argued that deaf students should be educated with other hearing impaired children to fully develop the use of sign language and become comfortable with the deaf culture. In addition, some educators believe that having specialized schools with specific resources aimed towards providing for special needs students would be more efficient and cost-effective, thus ensuring that CWD are receiving an adequate education.

On the other hand, teachers of CWD in specialized schools tend to have lower expectations of their students’ capabilities. As a result, CWD in special schools often receive an education below their capability. Furthermore, these students often have no opportunities at all to interact with normal children and adults, and this further raises the social barriers separating those with disabilities from those without. Specialized education gives CWD little opportunity to become actively contributing members of the society, and rather than giving CWD the right to education, it effectively becomes another obstacle to the realization of the full potential of CWD.

Inclusive education is the answer to this dilemma of specialized education, as it:

- Gives CWD equal access to the education that normal children receive, giving them the skills and knowledge to succeed in society;
- Opens up more employment opportunities, weakening the association between disability and poverty²;
- Allows people with disabilities to not only be self-reliant but also active contributors to the society;

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² A report from World Bank in 2011 shows a strong correlation between poverty and disability in Vietnam, especially when additional costs of disability are taken into account (Mont & Nguyen, 2011).
- Exposes children (with and without disabilities) to those who come from different backgrounds and situations, allowing for a more positive attitude towards diversity which will become a solid foundation for an inclusive society.

It should be noted that many times, what is termed “inclusive education” may actually be “mainstreaming” instead. “Mainstreaming” is the practice of placing children with disabilities into a normal classroom and then expecting them to adapt to this new environment. On the other hand, full inclusion as educators would call it actually involves adaptation on the part of the teacher and the classroom to the child with disabilities, for example by altering the curriculum, rearranging the placement of desks, or changing the activities to make it suitable for the child’s disability. Unfortunately, “mainstreaming” is the common practice around the world. This is also true of Vietnam. Such confusion between “mainstreaming” and “inclusive” is another obstacle in the development of an education system that includes and supports children with disabilities in reaching their fullest potential.

The mission of inclusive education is to serve the needs of disadvantaged children and make all efforts to ensure their full social integration and the realization of their full capacity. Investing in inclusive education will not only pay off in terms of human capital development or the establishment of a more open society, it also indicates a commitment to protecting universal human rights. In this case, it is the right to go to school, something that is often taken for granted today. However, for CWD, this right to education is a battle that too few win, especially when there is a lack of awareness or misinformation about disabilities among the general public. Establishing an education system that extends equal opportunities and equal recognition for all is the first step in addressing this issue of awareness. As the Salamanca Statement (from the UNESCO Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994) puts it, inclusive education is “the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all” (UNESCO, 1994).

Inclusive education benefits both CWD and normal children by preparing them for an integrated society that is consistent with the inalienable human right of equality. Furthermore, developing an education system that allows for full inclusion of CWD only paves the way for the inclusion of all children, regardless of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status or disability. As a country strongly committed to protecting its children, the future of the country, Viet Nam should make inclusive education for all a priority in its efforts to reform the education system.

5. Legal Support for Inclusive Education

5.1. Viet Nam’s international commitments to helping people with disabilities

- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Vietnam signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in October 2007 and plans to ratify it in 2014. CRPD is a major international milestone in declaring and protecting the rights of all people with disabilities, moving the issue of disability from a charity perspective to a rights-based perspective more than ever before. By signing the CRPD, the Vietnamese Government has indicated that it views disability not just as a medical issue but also a problem of social barriers and exclusion from normal life by discrimination and normative
standards. It is also a step forward in Vietnam’s commitment to protecting the rights of all Vietnamese people with disabilities, echoing the words in the country’s Constitution (Articles 59 and 67) and furthering the work of the national Ordinance on People with Disabilities in 1998. Once the CRPD is ratified, Vietnam will “undertake to ensure and promote the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities without discrimination of any kind on the basis of disability” (UN, 2006).

- **Biwako Millennium Framework (BMF) for Action (Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons 2003-2012)**

  The Biwako Millennium Framework (BMF) is an effort by Vietnam and other countries in the Asia Pacific region to develop an inclusive, barrier-free and rights-based society that does not marginalize people with disabilities. It is a regional policy guideline on issues of disability rights in the 2003-2012 Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons. The Framework contains 7 targets and priority areas:
  
  - A. Self-help organizations of persons with disabilities and related family and parent associations
  - B. Women with disabilities
  - C. Early detection, early intervention and education
  - D. Training and employment, including self-employment
  - E. Access to built environments and public transport
  - F. Access to information and communications, including information, communication and assistive technologies
  - G. Poverty alleviation through capacity building, social security and sustainable livelihood programs

  In the period 2003-2012, Vietnam has made significant strides in writing new laws and policies in compliance with the BMF guidelines. The country has also made periodic reviews of its policies and programs on disability according to the targets set by the BMF. Coupled with the signing of the CRPD, it is clear that Vietnam is committed to a rights-based approach to disability issues, and above all it wishes to push forward an integrated society for people with disabilities.

  **5.2. Law on Persons with Disabilities 2010**

  With the support of multiple stakeholders, NGOs, and emboldened by its commitments to the CRPD and BMF, Vietnam enacted its comprehensive Law on Persons with Disabilities in June 2010, which came into full effect on January 1, 2011. The Law serves as a solid legal foundation for the protection of people with disabilities in Vietnam. However, many difficulties still exist in practice, especially in the early days following the Law’s enactment. Local stakeholders, organizations and agencies did not get the guidance they needed from policymakers and officials at the central level. To address these problems, in April 2012, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs passed Decree 28/2012/ND-CP which is the first set of legal guidelines for implementation of the Law on Persons with Disabilities.
For the first time, Vietnam has an official definition of disabilities, which will greatly aid data collection, correct characterization of the type and severity of disabilities people are living with and monitoring the impact of programs. According to the Law and Decree 28/2012/ND-CP, the Government recognizes 6 types of disabilities: mobility; hearing and speaking; vision; mental; intellectual; and other disability/impairments (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2012). The Decree also clarifies how the levels of disability (severe, moderate and minor) are to be evaluated.

This official definition has certain differences from the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) framework. ICF-based surveys often classify people into six domains of disability - vision, hearing, mobility, cognition, self-care and communication - and four levels of severity – no difficulty, some difficulty, a lot of difficulty, and cannot do at all (WGDS, n.d.). The ICF categories and Vietnam’s official types of disabilities do overlap, but there are still some visible differences. The reason may be that the official definition of disability in Vietnam does not put the same level of emphasis on social contexts and environmental factors as the ICF framework. As more and more surveys and censuses in Vietnam are designed to use the ICF framework and the WGDS set of questions, the differences between the ICF’s and the Government’s definitions of disability may become problematic.

In addition to providing an official definition of disability, the Law also lays out the rights of disabled people in Vietnam to equal access to quality healthcare, rehabilitation, education, employment, vocational training, cultural services, sports and entertainment, transportation, public places, and information technology. It provides the legal framework that is crucial for an inclusive, barrier-free society that provides equal opportunities for all people with disabilities.

With regard to education for children with disabilities, the Law states that three educational approaches will continue to be practiced, which include inclusive, semi-inclusive, and specialized. However, “The State encourages persons with disabilities to participate in inclusive education” and the other two approaches should only be used if inclusive education is not suitable or if the family/guardian deems it necessary (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2010).

The Law also mandates subsidies for teachers, lecturers, administration staff and education support staff who are directly involved in the education of persons with disabilities. In addition, it clarifies the missions and activities of Inclusive Education Support and Development Centers.

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3 ICF was developed by World Health Organization (WHO) to provide a common language in health ICF was developed by World Health Organization (WHO) to provide a common language in health and health-related issues. Because disability can only be fully understood in its social context, the ICF describes disability as an interaction of three areas: body functions, activities, and environmental factors affecting these activities (WHO, 2002). Most surveys based on the ICF framework use a set of six short questions developed by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics (WGDS).
5.3. Inclusive Education by 2015 and other legal support from the Ministry of Education and Training

The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has long affirmed its commitment to inclusive education for all children of Vietnam, regardless of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic or any other factors that may lead to exclusion. As evident by the National Education for All (EFA) Action Plan 2003 – 2015, MOET has been consistently pursuing new developments and approaches that would ensure access to primary education, at the very least, for all children. However, the EFA Action Plan did not give any emphasis to education for children with disabilities, reflecting the lack of attention at the policy-making level to the issue of disabilities at the time. In fact, children with disabilities’ lack of educational opportunities may cause Vietnam to fail to meet its EFA goals by 2015. To address this problem, MOET has released Decision 23/2006/QĐ-BGD&ĐT on inclusive education for CWD. In 2007, MOET developed a specific plan to support education for CWD, the Education for Children with Disabilities Strategy and Action Plan 2007 – 2010 with a view to 2015.

Recently, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) in collaboration with MOET has taken a significant stride in the development of inclusive education by publishing a guide on the creation and running of inclusive education support centers. These centers provide information, materials, curricula, parental support, early identification, early intervention and other services that are beneficial to persons with disabilities and their families. The centers also function as part of a network of inclusive education services, linking parents with teachers, health specialists, etc. With the release of the Inter-ministerial Circular #58/2012/TTLT-BGDDT-BLDBXH between MOET and MOLISA on Regulation on condition and procedure of establishment, operation, operation suspense, reorganization, and dissolution of Centre supporting the development of Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities, MOLISA and MOET are aiming to develop functional and effective centers of inclusive education in all 63 provinces.

6. Vietnam’s inclusive education in practice

Three forms of education for CWD are currently practiced in Vietnam: specialized education, integrated education, and inclusive education. According to the 2010 annual report by the National Coordinating Council on Disabilities, there are 106 specialized schools across the nation, each with a capacity to serve about 100 students. Though in the past, there had been many efforts to open new specialized schools, now only two are built each year. These specialized schools mostly cater to the hearing and visually impaired, while physically disabled children either go to normal schools if they are lucky, receive care in rehabilitation centers, or stay home. Furthermore, most specialized schools are disproportionately located in urban areas, even though 75% of people with disabilities live in rural areas (ILO, 2013).

Integrated education consists of community-based day classes, volunteer groups, ethnic classes, charity classes, etc. Although these classes are beneficial in establishing strong bonds between CWD and the community, they are often small-scale and unable to reach many who need them.
In fact, inclusive education serves the largest number of CWD who can go to school. In the 2008-2009 school year, the Ministry of Education reported that 390,000 CWD were attending regular schools across the country (HI, 2012). Even though this figure means that there are many CWD who are benefitting from inclusive education in Vietnam today, it still accounts for only 28 % of the total number of CWD. Additionally, these students are mainly in kindergarten or primary schools; the attendance rate of CWD for secondary schools is less than 1 % (NCCD, 2010). The current system is clearly not equipped to serve the learning needs of CWD. Without the appropriate support, many CWD cannot meet the standards to advance to the next grade, and these children simply repeat grades until they are too old or until the costs far outweigh the benefits. Furthermore, what is called “inclusive” often just means mainstreaming students into regular classrooms without providing any further accommodations. Although students with disabilities are still able to learn in a mainstreamed classroom, they often do so with great difficulties. Mainstreaming reduces the possibility of success for CWD.

In total, only 9.2% of people with disabilities have attained a high school degree through all three forms of education (NCCD, 2010). The detailed breakdown of the educational levels of people with disabilities can be found in the chart below.

![Educational level of PWDs and Vocational level of PWDs](chart.png)


7. Challenges to be Addressed

7.1. Admission of Children with Disabilities into Inclusive Classrooms

Currently, the practice of inclusive education seems to be adopted arbitrarily from school to school without any coordinated organization or leadership from higher levels. Despite established policies that mandate inclusive education for every child who is capable of learning, most schools blatantly ignore the law and refuse admission to CWD. In order to get their children into school, parents of CWD have to put in extra efforts, with some even resorting to bribery. There is also a wide discrepancy in the progress of inclusive education across the country.

Different provinces have different levels of readiness in implementing inclusive education. Places where inclusive education projects had been implemented in the past are much

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4 In Vietnam, primary school is from grade 1-5, secondary school 6-9 and high school 10-12.
more prepared to implement the new Law on Disability. For example, teachers in Bac Kan Province, where Handicap International located its Inclusive Education Project, say that the experience gained from the Project has helped them anticipate numerous issues in the implementation of the new Law. They are much more prepared to accept CWD into their classrooms and adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of CWD. To help teachers and staffs who are new to special needs education, experienced teachers continue to travel to different parts of the province to circulate inclusive education theory and practice. However, success in inclusive education is still rather bounded by provincial borders, and it would be beneficial for the promotion of inclusive practice across the country if MOET would establish a national forum for teachers and educators interested in improving education for CWD.

One way to spread the success of inclusive education is a broad network of inclusive education support centers. MOET has been encouraging the establishment of at least one inclusive education center in every province. These centers, which provide early intervention services and life skill classes, are invaluable sources of preparation for a child with disabilities before joining an inclusive classroom. With the Inter-ministerial Circular #58/2012/TTLT-BGDDT-BLDTBXH guiding the creation and maintenance of inclusive education support centers, past specialized schools and institutions are now being turned into new support centers to develop and advocate inclusion. However, so far only 20 provinces have established these inclusive education support centers. In fact, even the capital city Hanoi still does not have an official center for the development of inclusive education; most centers are either private or small institutions belonging to teacher training colleges that do not widely advertise their services.

Another problem with the development of inclusive education is that the majority of schools with experience in inclusive education can only be found in large urban cities, which poses a big problem as about 75% of CWD live in rural areas (UNFPA, 2011). Transportation in rural areas is already difficult for people without disabilities; for the disabled population, it may well be impossible. This further limits the choices of schools for CWD.

Not many schools actually allow the enrolment of CWD. The reasons may include lack of infrastructure, unprepared teachers, no open seats, or even the preoccupation with grades and achievements that leads to selective admission. However untrue it may be, some people believe that CWD would fail to study well and thus drag down the performance of the entire school. This of course stems from the widespread misconception that disabled people are ‘useless beings’.

Parents can also be the source of selective enrolment, especially in large cities where families have the means to pick and choose. Parents want only the best, most reputable schools, and this is no difference in the cases of parents of CWD. In Ho Chi Minh City, despite the law mandating that every public school must accept CWD in its district, many schools turn away CWD with excuses such as the school is already operating at full capacity. This in turn forces certain schools to accept more CWD than the legal quota. For example, Nguyen Thien Thuat Primary School has many classes consisting of six or more students with disabilities, even though the maximum allowed by MOET is three. In Hanoi, the situation is no different. Parents of CWD continue to seek a spot in Binh Minh Primary School which has two classes designated
as ‘inclusive’ with the capacity of about 10 CWD. However, the school always over-enroll, and the cost to be admitted often reach thousands of dollars even for families with special connections to high-level officials.

Inclusive education cannot be successful if parents and school officials continue to place CWD with normal students without considering ratios or school capacity. As long as more schools are ready to practice inclusive education, even by accepting 4-5 students to the school per year, this phenomenon of overcrowding at certain schools should disappear. It is also necessary that parents forego their blind fixation with reputation and realize that for CWD to study in a school with many other CWD is sure to backfire. School officials must stop the blatant disregard of laws and policies concerning the right to education of CWD; every public school has to accept a child with disability who comes from their enrolment district.

7.2. Teacher and staff training for inclusive education

Teachers and staffs severely lack pre-service training on special needs education, especially with regards to inclusive education. Most people interested in teaching and/or working with children with disabilities can only pursue majors in special education, which provide the necessary skills to teach according to the needs of disabled children but do not necessarily train teachers on how to utilize these skills in a regular, inclusive setting.

For over a decade, special education has been offered as a major, or at the very least as part of the course offerings in many teacher training universities and every year about 800 college students graduate with a degree in special needs education, and this number continues to rise annually (MOET, 2010). The curriculum for special education majors is constantly being refined, with the support of foreign partners and professors. This indicates that more teachers now have the professional expertise needed to care for children with disabilities.

Unfortunately, inclusive education theories and practices are still missing from these special education curricula. Despite the fact that all prospective teachers should gain expertise in inclusive education, even special education majors remain largely unaware of this approach. In the Ho Chi Minh City University of Pedagogy, out of 60 credits required to graduate as a special needs education major, the Inclusive Education course takes 1 credit and furthermore, it is only an elective. The situation is similar in other universities and colleges across the country. Only in recent years has there been talk about inclusive education and the need to include this topic in teacher training. Therefore, most schools are still preparing materials and plans for inclusive education course and there is definitely a lack of readiness to make inclusive education a compulsory part of teacher training.

In the meantime, another serious problem is becoming apparent in education for CWD. There is a shortage of teachers with the professional expertise to practice inclusive education or provide early intervention services in preparation of inclusive education. Private early intervention centers have been addressing this problem by hiring individuals who have never received formal training in education for CWD. With the current job climate in Vietnam, many recent unemployed graduates, even from areas unrelated to education, have been working as special needs teachers. Some do attend a 12-day course on special needs education offered by
MOET, but there are many who continue to work with CWD without an official degree or certificate. This can have harmful effects on the child who is already more vulnerable and deserves proper attention and care.

As for in-service training, teachers have only been exposed to inclusive education theories through independent workshops organized by NGOs in partnership with MOET. The workshops are often a part of inclusive education projects by organizations such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS) or Handicap International (HI). As such, they have only reached a small group of teachers who are often clustered around project sites. However, those who have attended the workshops say that the information provided has been extremely valuable, and at the very least it has given teachers the confident to accept a child with disabilities into his/her class. Vietnam Institute of Educational Studies’ Center for Special Education plans to continue offering these workshops in new districts and provinces in order to reach more areas where CWD have been unable to receive a good quality education.

To capitalize on the success of the workshops thus far, teachers should have opportunities to share information and experience about inclusive education even after these events. They should also have the means to receive updates on new inclusive education practices across the country and the world, e.g. a journal for special needs teachers. Groups of teachers should also have the opportunity to visit other inclusive education schools to observe and comment on their practice.

7.3. Collaboration between ministries

Several ministries are involved in the care of people with disabilities. Naturally, the Ministry of Health is tasked with the provision of health care services and medical support. The Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs provides rehabilitation services and monetary stipends, mostly aimed towards people with physical disabilities and victims of war. The Ministry of Education and Training is concerned with special needs education and vocational training. The issue of disability concerns many stakeholders, so a multi-stakeholder approach to special needs education, specifically inclusive education, is a natural fit (HI, 2012).

With the traditional way of relegating responsibilities, however, the duty of implementing special needs education is split between MOET and MOLISA. This is because MOET focuses on vision, hearing, and cognitive disability in developing its plan for special needs education. Even teacher training programs focus on those three tracks: vision, hearing and cognition. When asked about education for children with physical disabilities, an officer from the Center for Special Education, MOET, replied that these children are taken care of by MOLISA, and MOET does not have any information. Traditionally, people with mobility problems have been institutionalized in rehabilitation centers that belong to MOLISA. While the main emphasis in these institutions is rehabilitation, classes and vocational training are still offered to people with disabilities. However, these offers are completely separated from MOET’s special needs education plan. Moreover, as these classes are conducted in specialized institutions, there is no opportunity for social integration and community inclusion. With social inclusion of people with disabilities being a national goal, MOLISA need to reconsider the traditional approach of
institutionalizing people with disabilities in rehabilitation centers and collaborate with MOET to develop a working inclusive education system.

Lack of inter-ministerial collaboration, coupled with weak coordination with different sectors and organizations, also lead to statistical shortcomings in Vietnam. Another resulting problem lies in public infrastructure, which continues to be wheelchair inaccessible and unsuitable for people with disabilities as a whole. For example, buses in Vietnam have no special seats for people with disabilities; the aisle is too narrow and there is no mechanism for the bus to lower and let wheelchairs on. Additionally, architects seem to be inexperienced in building infrastructure that can meet the needs of people with disabilities, and there have been many cases where ramps built for people with disabilities are in actuality too elevated for wheelchairs. As Mr. Tran Xuan Hieu, President of the Association of People with Disabilities in Hoang Mai District, Hanoi, has recently commented, “Most buildings do not [have features for disability access], and even those that do only have those features for show; people with disabilities cannot use them.” The situation at public schools is no different, of course, and as long as this issue remains unaddressed, inclusive education cannot serve the needs of all children with disabilities.

Inclusive education for CWD requires the contribution of many stakeholders. It is not only the responsibility of MOET or MOLISA. Rather, collaboration from other ministries such as Ministry of Transportation or Ministry of Construction is essential to the success of inclusive education. There must also be strong coordination between different levels, from central to local, to ensure effective implementation of policies and guidelines and that successful programs to improve inclusion can be spread across the country.

In fact, Vietnam has had several promising programs aiming to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities in society. The section below will describe three of these projects.

8. Promising Pilots on Inclusive Education

8.1. Handicap International’s Inclusive Education Project in Bac Kan Province (Northern Uplands)

Handicap International (HI) has long been active in supporting and securing the rights of the disabled in Vietnam. In 2009, in collaboration with Save the Children Vietnam, HI launched a new project titled *Towards Rights-Based Inclusive Education Access for Disabled and Disadvantaged Children in the Bac Kan Province, Vietnam*. The project ended in March 2012; although a complete final evaluation report has not been released, the program manager Marieke Stevens recently returned to Bac Kan and witnessed ongoing efforts to promote inclusive education and social integration of CWD and disadvantaged children in the province.

The main objectives of the project were to improve the social integration of the disabled and disadvantaged through promotion of rights-based inclusive education, to facilitate the involvement and participation of parents and their networks which will lead to the development of organizations that represent civil society, and to strengthen the capacity of the Bac Kan

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5 ("Loi di nao" danh cho nguoi khuyet tat, 2013)
Provincial Department of Education and Training in implementing inclusive education. In order to achieve these objectives, the following activities were carried out:

- Capacity building for mainstream and special school teachers, school managers and parents;
- Establishment of an Inclusive Education Support Team, which include five teachers and is responsible for continuing project activities and duplicating successful results in other communes and districts;
- Child-to-Child activities: using games and friendship-building activities, all children, both with and without disabilities, learn to understand disabilities as social barriers, anti-discrimination, and start to develop positive attitudes;
- Creation of Parent Clubs to strengthen the school-parent relationships and ensuring that parents have a voice in the development of inclusive education practice (HI, 2012).

Indeed, the Inclusive Education Support Team turned out to be the key determinant of the project’s sustainability. One year after the conclusion of HI’s project, these teams continue to operate. Although the frequency of their visits to local inclusive schools have decreased from twice a month to every two months, members of the Inclusive Education Support Teams are still raising awareness and guiding the local implementation of inclusive education. Furthermore, the high turnover rate of teachers in Bac Kan Province, though problematic in establishing a stable inclusive environment for CWD and disadvantaged children, also contributes to raising awareness of the importance and benefits of inclusion.

Parent Clubs also continue to be a valuable network of support, encouraging all families in the community to contribute to the development of inclusive education in schools. Although all of these parents are poor and work long hours, they still set aside time for fundraising activities as introduced by HI. Even in poorer communities where such fundraising activities are not feasible, parents volunteer their time to clean and repair school buildings, which are often severely damaged.

Thanks to the project, teachers, school managers and officials at the Department of Education and Training are now prepared to put the Law on Disability into practice across the province. With knowledge gained from the training workshops and three-year experience in implementing inclusive education, they now have the fundamental resources to ensure that all disadvantaged children, including CWD, have access to education and can achieve full social integration.

8.2. Dak Lak Inclusive Education Support Center for Children with Disabilities (Dak Lak Province, Central Highlands)

In 2007, MOET designated the Dak Lak Inclusive Education Support Center to be the pilot model for its program of turning past specialized institutions into inclusive education centers. At this time, the institution had been in operation for 10 years with much success in early intervention and other services for CWD. Teachers and staffs at the Dak Lak Center have all undergone various training workshops and courses offered by MOET, Ministry of Health, and
specialists from the Netherlands. Dak Lak Center is now the model for all inclusive education centers around the country.

The main activities of this center aim to provide support for early intervention and inclusive education specialists, which include:

- Advise and support the development of individual educational plans;
- Develop effective inclusive lessons/activities in classrooms with different types of disabilities, using toys, learning materials, extracurricular activities to promote CWD participation;
- Establish Circle of Friends and community support groups;
- Support school managers and teachers in inclusive practice management;
- Monitor, support past CWD at the Center who have progressed into inclusive schools; and
- Update database of children and people with disabilities in the province (Dak Lak Inclusive Education Support Center).

The Center currently offers specialized education to about 150 CWD who are not yet ready for inclusive schools. However, the Center fully believes that special education is only “pre-inclusive”. These children are provided with life skills trainings and other intervention services to prepare them for participating in normal schools. Every year, from 20 to 30 students can progress to inclusive education.

The Center also provides support for teachers, school managers and school authorities who are inexperienced with inclusive education practice. The Center has a dedicated group of teachers who go to different schools and provide their expertise when needed. Dak Lak Center also organizes conferences, workshops, etc. for teachers and parents of CWD. For older youths with disabilities, career service and vocational training are also offered.

In the school year 2011 – 2012, Dak Lak Inclusive Education Support Center had been able to support 300 CWD who participate in inclusive education. This is a wonderful sign of success for the Center, especially considering that in the previous year only 56 children were supported. Without a doubt, the model of Dak Lak Center must be replicated in other provinces of the country.

However, at the current time this Center only caters to four types of disability: vision, hearing, intellectual and autism. It is unclear how much support children with other types of disabilities typically receive when participating in inclusive education.

8.3. **Hope System of Care – Children of Vietnam (Da Nang, Central Province)**

Since 2008, Children of Vietnam (CoV) has been working with district governments in Da Nang City to implement the *Hope System of Care for Children with Disabilities* program in three districts. The programs in the first two districts, Hai Chau and Ngu Hanh Son, have concluded successfully and the local governments have incorporated many innovations from
Hope System of Care into their budgets and services. Using the experience and lessons learned from these two districts, CoV is continuing the success of Hope System of Care in Cam Le District with the hope to expand the program to the remaining districts in Da Nang City in the future.

The Hope System of Care program centers on the child with a wraparound case management methodology. Each child enrolled in the program is provided with an individualized care plan, devised by a Case Manager according to the needs of the child. Afterwards, an interdisciplinary team of specialists reviews this care plan and makes recommendations to develop a comprehensive individualized care plan. The Case Manager then works with the family to implement the plan, and the interdisciplinary team monitors the progress of the child. The key of this program is close and effective collaboration between multiple partners in order to develop a safety net system for all children with disabilities.

Education is of course an important part of each individualized care plan. The care plan makes sure to recommend inclusive education if it is suitable for the child. CoV then work with local school partners to enroll these children in an inclusive school. Tuition and school supplies are also provided by the organization (as families in the program all have difficult economic situations). The good relationships that CoV keep with various schools around the district mean that there is a higher chance of gaining admission to the school, as compared to when each family has to find opportunities on their own. The few cases of children not in inclusive schools are because of uncooperative parents, perhaps due to a lack of awareness in the benefits of inclusion.

Hope System of Care demonstrates that it is indeed possible and even efficient in the context of Vietnam to have multi-disciplinary specialists working together to address the needs of children with disabilities, as disability is an extremely multi-faceted issue. This ensures that every child with disabilities have their needs met in a comprehensive and balanced manner and not focused on one aspect or another. The need for effective collaboration across ministries and agencies to protect the rights of children with disabilities has always been evident, and the Hope System of Care model shows an excellent way to maximize productivity and success. There are bright prospects for the continuing institutionalization of this case management approach to disability.

9. Conclusion

Inclusive education for children with disabilities in Vietnam is a complex issue that needs urgent attention from government officials, teachers, parents, and the society at large. With the official support from the Vietnamese government and increasing interest from the public, there have been certain successes in inclusive education, such as the increasing number of children with disabilities in public schools. However, efforts to improve inclusive education in Vietnam have so far been scattered and not yet consolidated into a national action plan.

The first priority, echoed by many teachers, officials, and parents of children with disabilities, is to bring more attention to the issue of disability especially with a rights-based perspective. The traditional Vietnamese perspective on people with disabilities needs to be
reflected upon. Certain actions that are commonly thought to show compassion and understanding for people with disabilities such as giving gifts or exempting blind students from national exams may actually be contributing to the exclusion and discrimination of people with disabilities, stigmatizing them as an inferior group that cannot function unless given special help. Furthermore, the issue of disability is often explored in a way that only highlights the differences and not the similarities. The moral of the story should not just stop at admiration of the child’s fierce determination or taking pity on their defects; it can easily go one step further and affirm the equality in rights and capabilities between people with and without disabilities.

Another step that must be taken immediately to support the development of inclusive education is making inclusion the cornerstone of pre-service teacher training programs. The ethos of inclusion must be embedded within pedagogical training and not merely added as another course elective. According to Mel Ainscow, a renowned inclusive education specialist, “… changing outcomes for all students is unlikely to be achieved unless there are changes in the behaviors of the adults. Consequently, the starting point for inclusive school development must be with teachers” (Ainscow, 2007). Indeed, only teachers are in a position to push for admission of children with disabilities into normal schools and then provide them with an education that fully serves their needs.

MOLISA and MOET should strive to collaborate more closely on the issue of special needs education, and the two ministries should also employ help from other ministries, agencies, and interested parties. Disability is a multi-dimensional problem, so of course there would be multiple stakeholders. Figuring out a way for them to work together effectively is crucial if we want to see true inclusive education in practice. In the past decade there have been many NGOs working to improve the lives of people with disabilities in Vietnam, and there have been numerous projects focusing on inclusive education. Many teachers and educators in the country have also come up with innovative ways to practice inclusive education. Providing more opportunities to share experience and existing practices would enable enormous strides in bringing inclusion into the national education system.

In the process of writing this report, I had the privilege of listening to the personal story of Son Tran, an Agent Orange victim born with a birth defect but nevertheless has been quite successful in his academic endeavors. He made this memorable remark, “I feel like I grew up in such a normal environment that I don’t really feel like I am a disabled person.” Inclusive education is an important step in reaching that world where the exclusionary nature of disability no longer exists, and every person born with a bodily impairment can say, “I don’t feel like I am a disabled person.”

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