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## Commuting Challenges in Bangkok, Thailand: Voices of Blind Students that Public Administrators should Hear

**Theeraphong Bualar**

*School of Management, Silpakorn University, Phetchaburi Thailand 76120*

Email: [thiraphong@yahoo.com](mailto:thiraphong@yahoo.com);

Tel: +66-32-594-028 Fax: +66-32-594-022

### Abstract

This article sets forth a qualitative method for examining barriers that affect visually impaired students commuting to school in Bangkok, Thailand. Findings drawn from four focus groups of forty school-aged students with visual impairments clearly indicate that blind-unfriendly environment, poor public bus service, poorly-designed sidewalks and ineffective law enforcement to guarantee the disabled their right to commute are the major sources of worry among these students. Despite showing their need to commute, the students frequently encounter a number of challenges on their way to school. These challenges obviously have limited their commuting opportunity. The author recommends that the government of Thailand introduce strong tailored policy interventions to meet the commuting needs of the visually impaired. Without universal design and inclusive society, empowering visually impaired students through schoolings and education is not realizable.

**Keywords:** Disability policy; visually impaired persons; inclusive society; universal design

### 1. Introduction

This article focuses on the current experience of visually impaired students and their commute to mainstream schools in Bangkok in accordance with the Inclusive Education Policy of the Ministry of Education, Thailand. Raised awareness of people living with disabilities has occurred since the inception of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992). Persons with disabilities are very important for the development of a country. If governments ignore these people, they will be marginalized and eventually become social and economic burdens. However, if governments rehabilitate them properly, they could be economically productive and become agents of change in society.

The explanation of disability as applied to the politics of difference is not new; the bodily difference has been explained for centuries. Despite having no single and agreed-upon definition of disability among the theorists and authorities involved, disability is influenced by and in terms of pathology. From the twentieth century onwards, medical science has advanced rapidly. Disability has been studied using a medical-diagnostic approach which has become the foundation of disability explanation. The medical model of disability involves the major dysfunctions in what is considered typical hearing, seeing and mobility impairment. The medical conception of disability has put people with disabilities into health frames.

Apart from the medical explanation, many non-disabled people believe that disability is punishment because, as they believe, it is derived from a curse from god or from sinful acts caused

either by the afflicted individuals or their ancestors (Stiker, 2000; DePoy and Gilson, 2004). Asch and Fine (1988) summarize a set of common assumptions about disability, pointing out that disability is located solely in biology. When disabled people face problems, it is because of their impairments. They furthered their argument by stating that these people are frequently social victims. It can, therefore, be argued that disabled people become disabled because of social attitudes and definitions.

The pathological explanation and an erroneous impression of disability have produced socially stigmatized disabled people. There are groups against the medical model who have challenged this notion (Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1991; Morris, 1991; Campbell, 1992; Shakespeare, 1994). Subsequently, disability scholars have shifted the disability paradigm from a health context affecting such individuals to socially imposed restrictions and multiple environments in society which Oliver (1990) has termed a social model of disability. Disability scholars and disabled activists have come out to pinpoint the social marginalization and oppression which alienate disabled people from social life. Barnes (1991) suggests that social oppression produces manifold expressions of institutional discrimination against people with disabilities in education, employment, environment as well as misrepresentation in mass media.

Disability can also be explained by a rights-based approach. A rights-based approach can be traced back to the concept of human development. The main objective is to ensure human well-being because the theme of human development is people. A rights-based approach implies the concepts of protection, respect, facilitation and fulfillment. This approach has become increasingly fashionable in today's social development efforts because it ensures entitlement to resources (Sen, 2000). It is quite clear that this concept involves people whoever they are or wherever they were born. People must be entitled to appropriate resources and have the right to be respected and cared for by society.

The Government of Thailand has enshrined the right of people living with disabilities in the country's constitution and the Empowerment for Persons with Disability Act (2007). These two important documents emphasize equality in education, job opportunities, and other human rights. As of June 2011, the number of people living with disabilities reached 1,062,063, including 120,857 visually impaired persons (National Office of Empowerment for Persons with Disabilities, 2011). Statistics from the last few years indicate the number of people living with visual impairment has gradually increased.

Compared to people with other disabilities, those with visual impairments have high potential to participate in wider society. A visually impaired person is an individual whose better eye, with regular eyeglasses, is able to see less than 6/18 or from 20/70 downward until unable to see any light, or who has a visual field of less than 30 degrees. If visually impaired persons receive enough education and live in disability-friendly environments, they will become economically productive because their bodily movements and psychological cognition are not dysfunctional.

However, among visually impaired people, school-aged children with visual impairments are one of the most marginalized groups. In 1990, UNESCO proclaimed the "World Declaration of Education for All," in an effort to persuade every UN member to provide education for everyone, regardless of their background or appearance (UNESCO, 1990). The Government of Thailand, as a member of UNESCO, has responded to the "Education for all" campaign by promoting inclusive education in accordance with the Education for People with Disabilities Act (2008).

Inclusive schools are fundamentally important to school-aged students, including those who are blind. Inclusive education attempts to encourage disabled and non-disabled students to join in activities together (Booth, 2005). Previous studies suggested that inclusive education for disabled students can yield positive outcomes, i.e., social adaptation, fair impressions of disability and participation in wider society (MacCuspie, 1996; Sacks and Silberman, 2000; Sacks and Wolffe, 2006; Kail, 2007; Salleh and Zainal, 2010; Polat, 2011). It can be argued that combining the disabled with their non-disabled classmates may reduce or remove perceptions of stigmatization and exclusion. The Ministry of Education has, consequently, introduced inclusive education programs to nurture the capabilities of blind students.



Many researchers have shed light on the quality and methods of inclusive education. In Thailand, unfortunately, very little research has focused on the physical environmental factors that might motivate blind students and their family members to participate in inclusive education. Hammel et al. (2008) argues that the influence of the built environment for disabled persons is significant for social activities. An unfriendly environment can adversely affect physical and emotional health.

Several studies from a number of countries indicate that the social adaptation of students with disabilities is strongly influenced by their everyday environments (Mahoney, Larson and Eccles, 2005; McDougall, King and de Wit, 2004; WHO, 2004). Welsh et al. (2006) have proved that the social skills of children with disabilities deteriorate if accessible and friendly built environments and accommodative facilities are not in place. An unfriendly public transport environment can result in exclusion from an inclusive education. Stanley and Lucas (2008) have found that social exclusion has largely been linked to the concept of accessibility. Family members and caregivers tend to drop the idea of sending their visually impaired children to study in mainstream schools if public transport is poor. They may choose to send their children to boarding schools for the blind. Boarding schools for visually impaired students are good for primary education. At the secondary and tertiary levels, however, students with visual impairments should learn to mingle with non-disabled classmates. Placing students with disabilities in special schools naturally excludes them from mainstream society. That explains why there are a number of disability associations in Thailand. Special schools for disabled children can best train them to perform the activities of daily life (ADL). After performing ADL, they need social participation. Commuting to mainstream schools is becoming absolutely essential for these students.

In terms of physical settings, research suggests that inaccessible built environments result from the architect's lack of understanding of disabled persons' needs (Imrie, 1996; Imrie and Hall, 2001). Sidewalks present many objects, e.g. bus stop poles, fire hydrants, and overhead awnings from street shops, which make the movement of visually impaired persons more difficult. Such physical environments obviously discourage the visually impaired from visiting different places and deny their right to free movement. In this light, many disability scholars argue that street obstacles are an infringement of the right to move about freely (Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1991; Shakespeare, 1994; Barton, 1996; Barry, 2002; Edmonds, 2005).

Built environments are largely related to the concept of Universal Design (UD). UD is seen as a means of help for disabled persons in solving problems of unfriendly environments. Originally developed at North Carolina State University, UD refers to physical environments for all (Center for Universal Design, 1995). The principles of UD include simple and intuitive use, equitable use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, flexibility in use, low physical effort, size and space for approach and use.

UD understands that the body movement of human beings is fluid and changing. Each built environment must therefore be able to facilitate changes in people's movement and their needs. A design of a built environment without the concept of UD poses threats to people with disabilities because unfriendly physical settings discourage movement (Clarke, Ailshire, Nieuwenhuijsen and de Kleijn-de Vrankrijker, 2011). Thailand, as a developing country, has recognized the concept of UD and has acknowledged the right of people with disabilities to barrier-free movement. But the Government of Thailand, in reality, has not included people with disabilities in the built environment design process. Without the involvement of disabled people in the process of designing, construction and submission of completed work, built environments can be disability-unfriendly (Winzer, 1990; Coleridge, 1993; Dodds, 1993; Helander, 1993; Best, 1995).

In Bangkok, the most controversial built environments in UD for visually impaired persons include no-Braille street sidewalks, no color-contrast marks on the streets, poor public transit systems and high-floor buses without on-board lifts. In addition, there is no strong commitment from the government to eliminate such built environments. School-aged children who would like to attend inclusive schools must condition themselves to accepting risk when commuting. Although inclusive

education is promising, the journey to the inclusive school is challenging, especially for blind students who are newly recruited to such a school. Since these students are visually impaired, traveling alone requires caution and physical effort.

In Thailand, the Ministry of Education has promoted inclusive education and has persuaded visually impaired students to pursue their education at the secondary education level in mainstream schools

### **1.1. Public Mass Transit System and Built Environment in Bangkok Areas**

Since the implementation of inclusive education by the Ministry of Education, schools for visually impaired students have collaborated with the Bureau of Special Education to promote this policy. However, built environments and the public mass transit system are major factors influencing family member decisions to let the visually impaired commute to possibly distant inclusive schools. The National Disability Situation Report in 2009 reported that there were 276,129 disabled students who needed reliable public transport and a friendly environment for commuting (The National Office of Empowerment for Persons with Disabilities, 2009).

Of the 276,129 students, only 3,623 participated in inclusive education with mainstream schools. Many of them decided to study in boarding schools for disabled persons because of unfriendly physical environments and an unreliable public mass transit system have discouraged them. In Bangkok, the three most popular means of public mass transit which students with visual impairment frequently use include sidewalks, buses and the rail systems. However, these systems are not well placed.

### **1.2. The Bangkok School for the Blind and Mainstream Schools in Bangkok**

Founded as a special private school on January 12, 1939 by Miss Genevieve Caulfield, a blind American, the School for the Blind is the first school for visually impaired students in Thailand. Located in Bangkok, the school was well received by the general public and then was officially registered under the name of The Foundation for the Blind in Thailand under the Royal Patronage of H.M. the Queen on May 10, 1939. The major responsibilities of the school and the Foundation are (i) help visually impaired persons equally, (ii) provide education and vocational training for people with visual impairments and (iii) seek comprehensive cooperation with government and various domestic and international agencies.

In 1960, the school was under the supervision of the Office of Private Education Commission, Ministry of Education. In October 1977, the School for the Blind was officially renamed The Bangkok School for the Blind and operated as a non-profit organization. The school has provided both regular education and boarding education from kindergarten to primary level. While secondary education is beyond the capacity of the school teachers, the Foundation has attempted to widen the educational opportunities for visually impaired students. In doing so, the Foundation has sought official assistance from the Ministry of Education. Since 1997, the Ministry of Education has agreed to support secondary education for blind students and has implemented the "Inclusive Education for the Blind" program.

Inclusive Education is one of the initiatives that can help the Royal Thai Government achieve its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. Students with disabilities should not be left behind as the country develops. The current constitution, passed in 2007, has enshrined the right to education for students with disabilities. Section 49 states that "*people with disabilities must be entitled to the best quality of basic education without tuition fee at least twelve years provided by the government.*" In addition, Section 20 of the Empowerment for Persons with Disability Act 2007 states that "*the government is required to provide adequate education facilities and support for students with disabilities.*" These two important laws have had a positive effect on the National Education Act (1999) and the Education for Disabled People Act (2008). In order to abide by these two important

laws, Basic Education Commissioners have implemented an inclusive schooling policy that allows disabled students to study with non-disabled classmates.

Blind students living in a metropolitan area and studying with non-disabled schoolmates will face many difficulties when commuting to school. After finishing grade 6 at the Bangkok School for the Blind, most blind students will be sent to study in mainstream schools.

Nearby mainstream schools in Bangkok, under the Office of Basic Education Commission, have been asked to recruit students with visual impairments from the Bangkok School for the Blind each academic year. So far, three schools have provided seats and education facilities for blind students.

## **2. Methodology**

This article is derived from field research conducted between April and July 2011 in Bangkok, Thailand. Most research focuses on students with visual impairments in school centers in the school's educational facilities, self-adjustment to mainstream schools and social acceptance in classes. Data and information concerning their experience while commuting are scarce and rarely documented. Employing the qualitative method, this article explores the impact on students with visual impairments of an unfriendly physical environment when commuting to school and their strategies to cope with difficulties on the way.

In order to generate raw data from visually impaired students, a focus-group method was applied to capitalize on group interactions and to elicit appropriate experiential data. Students with visual impairments were encouraged to talk to one another. The focus-group method is useful for examining what they think, how they perceive their commuting experience and why they think of their perceptions in that way. Since some students were under 18 years, focus groups were held with the supervision of teachers of the Bangkok School for the Blind.

Four focus-group sessions with ten participants each were held at the Bangkok School for the Blind in July 2011. Each visually impaired student participated in the focus group only once. In addition to focus groups, I also interviewed a key informant to gather data to compare with those from the students. A key informant working as a teacher at the Bangkok School for the Blind was purposely selected. She is the coordinator of inclusive education schemes for the blind students at the school. After learning the purpose of this study, visually impaired students and the teacher agreed to provide in-depth information.

### **2.1. The Selection of Visually Impaired Participants**

Very few researchers have shed light on the experience of visually impaired students when they commute to and from mainstream schools. Hence, this study focused on how they struggle through unfriendly environments. The Bangkok School for the Blind was purposely chosen for this study.

Criteria for the selection of visually impaired participants included (1) persons who are currently studying at mainstream secondary schools, (2) persons who reside at the dormitory of the Bangkok School for the Blind, (3) persons who go to mainstream schools without a parent or other escort, (4) persons without any intellectual impairment or mental disorder and (5) persons able to communicate verbally.

The names of visually impaired students were provided by the Bangkok School for the Blind. According to the criteria, forty visually impaired participants were recruited.

### **2.2. Data Collection and Analysis**

Semi-structured interview guidelines for focus groups were used to encourage visually impaired participants to talk about how they struggle through unfriendly environments while commuting to school. The interview guide was developed following a review of the literature and relevant policies of

inclusive education. The guide covered several key areas: self-preparation (if traveling to schools alone), experience with the public transport system while commuting to school, experience with built environments on the way to school and their strategies to deal with difficulties while commuting.

In order to protect the privacy of the participants, they were given fictitious names and their bio-data remains concealed. The focus groups took place in a meeting room at the Bangkok School for the Blind and lasted for approximately two hours.

With the consent of the participants, their discussions during focus-group sessions were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. After the focus groups, responses were grouped by statement. All quotations were taken from their experiences as related in the group discussions. Each response was studied and discussed within each theme. Direct quotations were selected to illustrate an important theme raised by the visually impaired students. Each theme was then considered in relation to relevant literature.

### 2.3. The Participants

The forty participants included thirty students who are 17 to 20 years old and ten who are older than 20. Female students numbered 25 while the rest were males. Common disability types included low vision (10 persons), followed by complete blindness (25), and blindness with limping conditions (5 persons). Most participants were born blind (35 persons), while 2 persons had become blind as a result of eye diseases. Only 3 persons were the victims of accidents.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Information from the four focus groups indicates that blind students encountered various obstacles at school, including poor infrastructure design and ineffective law enforcement.

### 3.1. Poor Bus Routes and Sidewalks

Responses from focus groups indicate that blind students faced various kinds of physical challenges and that such challenges have aggravated commuting situations among these students. Disabled-unfriendly infrastructure services negatively impacted their morale and discouraged them from commuting to school. Despite learning how to travel from place to place in Bangkok, actual traveling is not always easy for them. Ton, a 19-year-old student, discussed how the blind-unfriendly bus route challenged him.

*'I have to get up early during the weekdays when my school is operating because I have to spend like an hour or more to get a bus. The bus stop usually accommodates more than five different bus routes. I often shout out loud to ask anyone whether the bus is my bus.'*

Som, another 19-year-old student, added:

*'During rush hours, I received no response from any passengers on the bus. My strategy is to find any passengers waiting for the bus at the bus stop and ask them for help. Sometimes, they leave me because their bus comes before mine. I am back to square one, then.'*

Ploy, an 18-year-old student, said that:

*'The situation is worse during the rainy season. It is very difficult to get the bus during rush hours in the rainy morning. I usually get to the school late if it is raining. My non-blind classmates suggest that I hail a cab. They don't know how difficult it is when hailing a cab because I don't see a cab coming. I have to ask some non-blind commuters to hail a cab for me.'*

Other barriers reported by blind students concerned sidewalks. Sidewalks without Braille can pose dire threats to them. Braille-tiled sidewalks facilitate movement because they give directions to the students. Yet, Braille-tiled sidewalks have been unwittingly destroyed by city repair crews.

Jack, 18 years old, told me that:

*'For the blind, Braille-tiled sidewalks are absolutely essential because they tell us when to stop, when to walk, when to turn right or left. Without such sidewalks, we have to take a guess and the guess means to risk our limbs and lives when on the road.'*

Jane, 20 years old, supported Jack's argument:

*'Many sidewalks in Bangkok used to have Braille tiles, but the tiles are sometimes misplaced or missing. I was told that some government agencies had removed the tiles to dig up a hole to install a fire hydrant. But the fire hydrant does not give us the way.'*

It is clear that bus routes and sidewalks in Bangkok are blind-unfriendly. Blind students believe that this is the reason why they arrive at school late and the reason why they have very limited choices to study at more distant schools. It does not seem to overstate the case to say that these students have struggled due to poor infrastructure and sidewalks. However, the findings above illustrate that while these students negotiate their commuting challenges, it is not easy for them to overcome these barriers.

### 3.2. Ineffective Law Enforcement

Based on the responses from the focus groups, the quality of bus services is a major source of worry. Bus transport is operated by the Bangkok Mass Transit Authority (BMTA) in cooperation with certain joint-service bus companies. The BMTA has also privatized a number of routes. However, some participants reported that both BMTA and joint-service buses are too dangerous for them to get on board.

Om, 19, told me that:

*'At bus stops, many buses, especially the joint-service buses, don't make a complete stop and they don't park the bus at the assigned areas. I had a bad experience once because I fell on the road from the bus because it was moving when I was trying to get off. I twisted one of my ankles then.'*

Pop, 20, discussed careless motorbike drivers riding on sidewalks during rush hours:

*'Apart from unnecessary things on the sidewalks and missing Braille tiles, I have to avoid motorcycle drivers riding on the sidewalks, especially rush hours in the morning. It is really annoying because it should be a pedestrian area. I realize that the traffic policemen are on duty during rush hours to alleviate traffic jams. I know riding motorbikes on the sidewalk is unlawful, but I don't know why they let the motorcyclists do that.'*

Under the supervision of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, sidewalks in Bangkok have caused difficulties while commuting. Studies in Thailand show that sidewalks and the built environment in Bangkok are not accessible for visually impaired persons (Chaibuadaeng, 1996; Kraisornsi and Kachonkiatwattana, 1997; Nilsriphaiwan, 2000; Cheevapongphant, 2004; Panklang, 2005). They indicate that sidewalks in Bangkok and other big cities generally are not smooth and not completely covered. There are lots of unnecessary street obstacles, e.g., benches, overhead awnings and drooping tree branches. These may cause injuries to blind students when they are commuting. In addition, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) has allowed street vendors to sell their goods on the sidewalks. These vendors have made a narrow sidewalk even narrower and created further difficulties for the blind.

Apart from the sidewalks, the bus system organized by the Bangkok Mass Transit Authority is a study in confusion. There are two main supporting arguments: first, the bus routes are not well connected. Some trips require two or three transfers to reach a destination. Each bus stop in Bangkok may serve more than three bus routes. At each stop on the road, there is no public address system to inform the passengers about which bus numbers are arriving. On board, bus employees sometimes tell non-disabled passengers where to disembark which facilitates their travel independence. Unfortunately, visually impaired passengers will have to shout out to ask for help. The situation recurs if they have to transfer buses to get to their destination.

Second, there is no friendly bus service to support disabled persons. In Bangkok, buses do not conform to the UD concept. Every bus in Bangkok is difficult to board because the steps are high above the ground and require strength to maintain the body's balance when getting on. The problem worsens if visually impaired persons need to travel during rush hour in Bangkok. Buses are too overcrowded to board during rush hour. Visually impaired people will call a taxi if necessary, though it is costlier.

The Skytrain and the subway are other choices for commuting in Bangkok. The Skytrain is operated by the Bangkok Mass Transit System, PCL, while the subway is managed by the Bangkok Metro, PCL. These are the friendliest modes of travel for blind students. Facilities for the visually impaired passengers, such as Braille lines in the station areas, a PA system both in stations and in each train car and security guards standing by to offer help, are in place. Even though the Skytrain is convenient, not every student with visual impairment can use it because the passes are expensive when compared to bus tickets.

The situation will become acute if visually impaired students are trapped in urban poverty in a sprawling metropolis like Bangkok and they have to struggle to commute from home to school without a parental escort. Although inclusive education is promising, the journey to the inclusive school is still the most challenging aspect, especially for blind students who are newly recruited to such a school. Since these students are visually impaired, traveling alone requires resourcefulness and an ability to solve problems as they arise.

The findings indicate that law enforcement officials fail to protect the rights of the blind. It is commonly believed that many government agencies are too weak to guarantee effective enforcement of bus-service law. Furthermore, the monitoring system of disability rights protection is not yet in place. It could be best argued that blind students have to formulate their own strategies to go to school.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Based on responses from the four focus groups, this article provides insights into the situation of visually impaired students who pursue their education at mainstream schools. Findings show that these students carry the burden of poor design. The situation worsens when it comes to law enforcement necessary to ensure an inclusive society, especially one inspired by UD. UD involves several aspects of the students' commuting activities. Even so, visually impaired students reported a strong intention to go to school. They firmly believe that going to school is a meaningful activity that could enhance future employment opportunities and greater economic productivity.

In order to alleviate the problems, concrete and tailored interventions for policymakers in Thailand to improve bus route services and sidewalks are recommended. First, the government must provide an increased number of disabled-friendly transportation services. Private companies operating the bus service system should be given tax incentives if they can provide disabled-friendly buses for visually impaired persons and other persons with different disabilities. In addition, a tax rebate should be introduced to help any construction company owners who involve people with disabilities in the design process and work completion submission process. In terms of law enforcement, the government must also bring legal charges against any companies or individuals who fail to abide by the transportation laws.

Although there is an increasing amount of research that examines the different experiences of visually impaired persons when using public services, many researchers neglect the role of government agencies as public service providers. An analysis of public service providers in disability research will contribute to disability literature by examining the impact of government policies on UD and land transport services.

Additionally, different classifications of disabilities may provide different aspects of travel difficulties. This study could possibly be extended to ageing and other areas. Extensive research on disability and UD in particular will provide valuable insights into the experiences of people with

disabilities. Because qualitative research represents an inductive step of inquiry, it is inappropriate to generalize the results beyond the area of visually impaired students. Had a quantitative method been used together with focus groups, the results could have been cross-checked.

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