



Through the Walls of Inclusion: The Higher Education Institution Perspective in Philippines

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Authors' contributions

This work was done through collaborative efforts of the authors. Author MGIM conceptualized the study and came up with the research proposal and design. She managed to write the manuscript and do the data collection process. Transcription was done collaboratively with author LPPL as well as the qualitative data analysis part. Authors worked in writing the final manuscript and reviewing of literatures. Also, author LPPL made it to searching publication opportunities for the paper. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Every learning institution envisions to uphold the principles of inclusive education. A higher education institution like Eastern Samar State University must accommodate all learners of different backgrounds, with or without special needs. Hence, this phenomenological study was conducted to explore views and experiences of faculty on inclusive education, with particular focus on their encounter with students with special needs (SENS). Data gathered through in-depth interview of five selected faculty members with direct experiences on students with special needs in their classes, were transcribed and coded for themes and patterns. Results revealed that the research participants have the basic understanding of inclusive education. Faculty members consider their inclusive teaching experiences challenging and become more interventionist in providing learning activities to students with and without special needs. Major challenges encountered by the faculty members are on their preparedness to teach students with special needs especially in providing activities to their classes, and how equipped are they with the skills to

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cater to the learning needs of these students with special needs mainstreamed with the regular classes. With the challenges faced by the faculty members, the university can consider the need to develop and upgrade their knowledge and practical skills on IE practices in formulating policies and professional development activities.

Keywords: Higher education institution; teaching and learning; inclusive education; inclusive teaching; students with special needs (SENs).

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a general mandate for the state to protect and promote the rights of all citizens to quality education at all levels, and to take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all as stated in Article 14 Section 1 of the Philippine Constitution. One of the Sustainable Development Goals of the country is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The context of inclusive education has so many legal bases that sprang from many legal orders and policy frameworks of the Department of Education [1].

In the realization of education for all, we must ensure that all learners have access to quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives. Still, today, millions of children, youth and adults continue to experience exclusion within and from education around the world. The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (2008) and other international human rights treaties prohibit any exclusion from or limitation to educational opportunities on the bases of socially ascribed or perceived differences, such as sex, ethnic origin, language, religion, nationality, social origin, economic condition, ability, etc. Education is not simply about making schools available for those who are already able to access them. It is about being proactive in identifying the barriers and obstacles learners encounter in attempting to access opportunities for quality education, as well as in removing those barriers and obstacles that lead to exclusion (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization [2]).

The concept of inclusion has been broadened to cover all barriers to education seen to profoundly transform education systems and learning environments, get them to welcome and respond to difference and diversity, and genuinely achieve EFA [3,4]. UNESCO now defined inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity in the needs of all children, youth, and adults through increasing participation in learning, culture and communities and reducing and eliminating exclusion within

and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures, and strategies, with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children [1,2].

Very little is known about the practice of educational inclusion in the Philippines. The absence of a shared approach to education in the country, one that is open to all students, suggests that a strong conceptual basis for inclusive education (IE) remains to be established. This lack of grounding for a sound practice of IE makes it difficult to articulate the reasonable extent of involvement members of the school community must have in the education of children with special needs (CSN) [3,5].

Recently, there have been cases of students with special needs admitted to the different colleges of the Eastern Samar State University. This exists since there are no schools in the locality for children with special needs, so they have been mainstreamed to the regular classes in the basic education, and it turns out that they enroll in the university to pursue higher education. This posed concerns to faculty members with the issue of accommodating these students considering that they need different interventions and activities for them to cope with the regular environment. However, with the broadened concept of inclusion, it is expected that educators need to change and modify content, approaches and strategies, with a teaching concept that includes all learners guided with the principle that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. This study sought to explore views and experiences of selected faculty members of Eastern Samar State University-Salcedo Campus on inclusive education to disclose their understanding of the concept of inclusion and evaluate gaps in the way they view it from the real meaning of inclusiveness. It aimed to reveal the extent of understanding of teachers on inclusive education that influences the inclusiveness of their teaching practices.

1.1 Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study is anchored on the symbolic interactionism theory of Blumer (1969) as cited by Fine and Sandstorm [4] which dwelled on three basic premises: (1) humans interact with things based on meanings ascribed to those things; (2) the ascribed meaning of things comes from our interactions with others and society; (3) the meanings of things are interpreted by a person when dealing with things in specific circumstances. In this manner, teachers' understandings of inclusive education are based on their encounter with specific circumstances in the classroom or learning context and their actions towards the concept are based on the interpretation they attached to the concept of inclusion.

1.2 Significance of the Study

Education systems that are inclusive support each individual to reach his or her full learning potential, thereby creating more inclusive and broad-based human resources in a society. Inclusiveness and equity throughout the education system are key factors for advancing economic growth, leading to greater recognition that educating excluded groups and raising their achievement is an economic imperative. On the process of making education inclusive, educators need to have sufficient understanding of what inclusive education is. The understanding educators have on what inclusive education affects classroom teaching practices and their perceptions on exclusion of students from the mainstream class due to special needs. Analysis of the extent of how educators view the concept of inclusive education will help educational leaders design professional development programs and policies in terms of promoting inclusive teaching practices and admitting students with special needs to the regular school system.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design which follows a systematic subjective approach to describe life experiences and give them meaning. Data analysis was anchored on Collaizzi's phenomenological method. Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The

fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the phenomenon [5]. The Collaizzi's seven step method are: (1) transcribing all the subject's description; (2) extracting significant statements; (3) creating formulated meanings; (4) aggregating formulated meanings into themes and clusters; (5) developing an exhaustive description; (6) identifying the fundamental structure of the phenomenon and (7) returning to participants for validation.

2.2 Research Procedure

The researcher sought approval from the College Administrator and the Deans of the different colleges for the determination of samples that were involved in the study. Five (5) faculty members were subjected to in-depth interview. Purposive sampling was employed to identify faculty members who have direct experiences with student with special needs (SENs) admitted to the colleges. The interview was done in Eastern Samar State University. Further, data was analyzed using categories and themes.

2.3 Researcher's Reflexivity

During the conduct of the research, the researcher put herself as an educator who has a positive attitude for inclusive education and see it as not only directly addressed to students with special needs but to all learners with differences. Her experiences in teaching professional education subjects in the teacher education made her see that learning can be managed in any contexts. However, she understands that educators both have positive and negative biases towards inclusive teaching attributed to several factors.

3. RESULTS

Information gathered from the respondents through in-depth interview was processed through its methodology to gather reliable results and validation of the questions in terms of clarity, understandability, and appropriateness [5]. The following presentations are the results and discussions by theme:

3.1 Theme 1. Inclusive Education is Reaching out to All Learners

From the responses of the participants, a clear concept they have in mind about inclusive

education is reaching out to all learners regardless of their personal, physical, economic, and social backgrounds. "All I know is that when inclusive education is talked about, it is looking at the learners from an equal perspective, regardless of their abilities and special needs", Ms. M said. Moreover, respondents were aware that inclusive education concerns learners with special needs, disabilities mainstreamed in the regular class set up. "I have encountered different learners in my class and there was one who has a walking disability, however he managed to cope up with the learning tasks, so I say inclusive education covers all learners of different backgrounds, and that their disabilities do not directly tell their learning deficiencies", Ms. N further added. Their responses pointed out to the theme that inclusive education involves reaching out to all types of learners whoever they may be and radiates a positive perception of inclusion.

3.2 Theme 2. Having Learners with Special Needs in a Regular Class Setup is Challenging

Since all the participants have directly experienced having students with special needs in their classes, they really have compared the experience of teaching a regular class setup without these students with special needs. Presence of learners with special needs in the regular classrooms poses challenge to instructor in the university as to how they can let them perform learning tasks and encourage them to participate. "It's very challenging. Like when you know somebody from the group needs a different learning task, then I will just ignore and let her/him join the rest, Ms. M said. For these learners with special needs to be given equal attention like the rest of the group, instructors encourage collaboration in doing the learning tasks. "Sometimes, I must think that he/she is just the same as the others, I let him/her be with the group, encourage him to participate and the others to treat him like he is normal. That way he tries to do the task and learn. It's too challenging on my part", Ms. O said. "It's challenging especially that my student once obviously has behavior problem caused by his disability, he was so shy and sometimes he prefers to stay alone while doing the task, and so I have to think of how can I encourage him to join the rest of the group, and when I see he's improving, I feel happy somehow," Ms. P added. It is clear from the responses that faculty members try to do

collaborative learning activities as interventions to students with special needs.

3.3 Theme 3. Inclusive Teaching is Necessary

From the fact that there are no other ways for learners with special needs to attend formal schooling especially that there are no special schools in the locality that can address this demand, participants deemed inclusive teaching necessary. "If we shut our doors to these learners who would like to finish college despite their disability, where will they go? It is important that we have to be inclusive in our teaching so they too will get the proper education they deserve", Ms. M said. "They too deserve to go to school, to finish college, so what I can best do is to treat them like everyone else. However, if I will encounter a deaf or blind student, the case may be different already because I am not trained enough to handle such learners' special needs," Ms. O added. Cases of students with special needs encountered by the participants were those with speaking defect, walking disability, and partially impaired vision. Responses of the participants pointed to the need to be inclusive in teaching, treating learners equally despite their differences and special needs.

3.4 Theme 4. Faculty Members Need Appropriate Information and Skills for Inclusive Teaching

In the university, despite the positive attitude of faculty members to accommodating students with special needs and disabilities, they see the need for them to be informed appropriately how can teaching them be best done. Also, they perceive their unpreparedness to teach and cater to the needs of these learners. "I am not really trained to teach learners with special needs, good that I only have one who has partially impaired vision, and he can still adjust to activities given to the group," Ms. N said. "Every day, we do inclusive teaching even if we do not have learners with special needs in our class, we have students who are different from each other, that requires us skills to teach effectively," Ms. O added. Further, Ms. M said "We really do not have guidelines in the university about accepting students with special needs, just that inclusive education is a general mandate, and we have to be equipped with skills to handle cases if there are. I am a general education teacher, and I admit I need training on dealing with learners

having special needs. My undergraduate preparation doesn't warrant that I can teach all types of learners." The responses highlighted the need to develop teachers' knowledge and skills in doing inclusive teaching. Relevant trainings and professional development activities can help.

4. DISCUSSION

Inclusive education ensures that all learners have access to quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives. Education does not only serve those who can access it, but also removes barriers and obstacles for learners to access it. UNESCO now defined inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity in the needs of all children, youths, and adults through increased participation in learning.

After conducting the in-depth interview with five (5) faculty members of Eastern Samar State University-Salcedo Campus, it was revealed that they already have a broader meaning of inclusive education. It just goes out of the usual organized placement of children with disabilities in the mainstream classrooms, but also reaching out to all learners, welcoming, and responding to their differences and diversity. The participants' understanding of inclusive education coincides with the broadened definition that inclusive teaching must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of students, accommodate both different styles and rates of learning and ensure quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, and teaching strategies [6].

They also have a positive perception of inclusion, not considering it as burden but a challenge on their part. The positive attitude of the faculty towards these students made them see these learners same as the others. This coincides with the idea of Glenn [7] saying that there is a connection between the teacher's interactions (both with children with special needs and others), their teaching style [8] and their beliefs about the abilities of children with special needs [9]. Also, further concluded that the teacher's beliefs and their attitudes towards disability might relate to the overall quality of their teaching [10].

Having students with special needs in the typical classrooms is seen as a challenging task by the faculty in the university. Students with special needs are a challenge for the university, [11,12] not only in terms of eliminating architectural

barriers [13], but also with regards to more ample access to the curriculum, teaching, learning [14] and evaluation [15]. Further, faculty members view inclusive education necessary for learners with special needs specially that no special schools for them can be found in the locality [16,17]. The university must accommodate learners with special needs after they finished the regular schooling in basic education [18,19].

Major challenges encountered by the faculty members are on their preparedness to teach students with special needs especially that they must be 'interventionist' in cases of providing activities to their classes, and how equipped are they with the skills to cater to the learning needs of these students with special needs mainstreamed with the regular classes. Although they have devised individualized means to encourage these learners to learn with the regular class, they still see the need for them to be trained and oriented of best practices that can be adapted or initiated to educate these learners with special needs. This further supported this demand saying that for inclusion to be successful, teachers need to be familiar with the process and its challenges. It is of paramount importance to develop and upgrade the teachers' knowledge, practical skills [20], and their value system [21].

5. CONCLUSION

Faculty members in the university positively regard inclusive education through accommodating students with special needs in their regular classes and encouraging collaborative learning for them, and they deem it necessary. The faculty view inclusive teaching as a challenging task that they must be more 'interventionist' in coming up with learning activities for students with or without special needs. The university is on its way of promoting the principles of inclusive education, despite lack of specific guidelines to admitting students with special needs and disabilities. With the challenges faced by the faculty members with direct experience of students with special needs, the university must investigate these issues through and sustain inclusive teaching practices.

CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

The information that was used in this research were the individual views of participants on the issues related to the subject. Hence, in the interest of future predicaments that may arise

based on the impressions of the readers, the identities of the participants were not divulged in this study. The researcher reserved the right to protect the participants and the university in general. As per international standard or university standard guideline participant consent and ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the authors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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