

THE RIGHT TO APPROPRIATE EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES FROM TWO INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study, using the case study approach, aims to find out how two inclusive schools protect and uphold the right to have appropriate education of children with disabilities through their inclusive educational policy and processes derived from the experiences of the stakeholders in the school. With the main research question of: “To what extent that the inclusive educational programs of these two schools safeguard the right of appropriate education of children with disabilities?” Particularly, the study explored: (a)The practices and policies of the schools that enable inclusive education; (b)The experiences of the stakeholders in the right to inclusive education; (c)The innovative strategies utilized by the school administrations and teaching force in upholding the right to have ; and (d) The outcome of inclusion on the school and community culture. The partakers of the study included students with and without disabilities, school administrators, special and general education teachers, parents and caregivers. Data were analyzed and triangulated within multiple sources to ensure substantiation thus identifying discrepancies and commonalities specifically using in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with administrators, teachers, parents and caregivers, field observations, document and archival exploration, portfolios and videotape analyses. Data analysis was done concurrently with data collection through an interactive, recursive and dynamic process and quotations were used for exposition and clarification of major themes. Findings of this study revealed accounts of significant harmony within major stakeholders at both theoretical and application levels in their journey in realizing and upholding the right to have appropriate inclusive education program for children with disabilities. Implications for future research in inclusive education are discussed.

Keywords: Appropriate Education, Inclusive Schools, Inclusive Education

Introduction

Inclusive education is an unabashed announcement, a public and political declaration and celebration of difference... [However,] it would appear that the development of education systems has been predicated by the denial of the existence of difference... Turning this around it is not a project for osmosis. It requires continual proactive responsiveness to foster an inclusive educational culture. (Corbett & Slee, 2000, p. 134)

With the advent of Batas Pambansa Blg. 232 also known as Education Act of 1982 and Republic Act 7277 (as amended by RA 9442 and 10524), the welfare of children with special needs in the Philippines was realized. It was stated in the statutes that the State shall ensure that disabled persons are provided with adequate access to quality education and ample opportunities to develop their skills and the state shall also take into consideration the special requirements of disabled persons in the formulation of education policies and programs (R.A. 7277, Chap.II). Additionally, B.P. 232 (Chap. II) states and defines the roles and scope of special education in the Philippine Integrated System of Education.

Over the years, the approach to the management of children with special needs has evolved from the traditional to medical, social, and bio-psychosocial. And while those in the legislative or executive branches of government, whether on the international or local scenes, are debating the pros and cons of each management style, our children with special needs are left on the sidelines waiting for a decision that could determine the program options available to them. Unfortunately for these children, the waiting can take a long time. In the meantime, time passes on and these children soon become adults. Depending on the program they get in or from their countries, homes, parents, or caregivers, they become either productive members of their community, or a burden to them; needing whatever support they can get from however much their government allots for people with disabilities.

Presently, the Department of Education (DepEd) Bureau of Elementary Education (BEE) has the philosophy that the State shall promote the right of every individual to relevant quality education regardless of sex, age, breed, socio-economic status, physical and mental condition, social or ethnic origin, political and other affiliation (www.deped.gov.ph). The State shall therefore promote and maintain equality of access to education as well as the enjoyment of benefits of education by all its citizens (BP Blg. 232). The ultimate goal of special education shall be the integration or mainstreaming of learners with special needs into the regular school system and eventually in the community (www.deped.gov.ph).

Moreover, DepEd includes special education and inclusion as key programs and projects. Specifically, inclusive education in the Department of Education was emphasized in DECS (now DepEd) Order No. 26 s. 1997 - Institutionalization of SPED Programs in All Schools and DepED Order No. 72 s. 2009 – Inclusive Education as Strategy for Increasing Participation Rate of Children. The said department orders state that the role or function of SPED Centers will be expanded as to the support of children with special needs who are integrated in regular school, assist in the conduct of in-service training and to conduct continuous assessment of children with special needs and to include in the School Improvement Plan (SIP) a comprehensive inclusive education program that guarantees the right of children with special needs in regular

schools to receive appropriate education. (www.deped.gov.ph).

The children with special needs (CSNs) can be enrolled in regular schools with additional support services from trained SPED teachers. This can be either partial or full mainstreaming (Policies and Guidelines for Special Education, Art. IV Sec. I; Art. VI Sec. 1.2.1 & Sec. II, 1997). In partial mainstreaming, the CSN is enrolled in the special class and is integrated in non-academic subject and/or activities and when he is ready or prepared is integrated fully in the regular class (Policies and Guidelines for Special Education, Art. VI Sec. 1.2.1, 1997); In full mainstreaming, CSN sits all the subjects, academic or non-academic (Policies and Guidelines for Special Education, Art. VI Sec. 1.2.1, 1997); The self-contained program is intended for more severe cases or for those who are highly exceptional in intellectual capabilities (Policies and Guidelines for Special Education, Art. IV Sec. II, 1997); A minimum of two (2) CSN shall be integrated in the regular class at a given time; and A maximum of two (2) exceptionalities shall be accommodated at a given time.

As reported by the Department of Education, Bureau of Elementary Education, Special Education Division (www.deped.gov.ph) as of school year 2004-2005 that there are 156,270 children with special needs enrolled in schools. Specifically, 77,152 are mentally gifted/fast learners (G/FL) and 79,118 are children with disabilities. As to the children with disabilities, 40,260 have learning disability (LD); 11,597 have hearing impairment (HI); 2,670 have visual impairment (VI); 12,456 have mental retardation (MR); 5,112 have behavior problems (BP); 760 have orthopedic impairments/handicap (OH); 5,172 have autism (Au); 912 have speech defect (SD); 142 have chronic illnesses (CI) and 32 have cerebral palsy (CP) (www.deped.gov.ph).

As to the schools, there were 2,149 schools offering SPED programs, 4 were considered as national special schools, 450 were private special schools; 151 were recognized Special Education Centers; 4,034 were Special Classes; and 1,544 were regular schools with SPED programs (www.deped.gov.ph). Apart from that, DepEd also disclosed that from year 2001 to year 2004, there were at least 1,190 trainers and administrators who have received SPED Personnel Enhancement Program for Inclusive Education (www.deped.gov.ph).

The introduction of the policy of inclusion in the Philippine educational system, with the implementation of Philippine EFA 2015, will categorically require a number of extensive changes as the focus shifts from the learners having to adjust to the demands of the system, to the system's being capable of accommodating the diverse needs of all learners as inclusively as possible even in the preschool area. A system change of this nature requires significant reform and restructuring of all school operations, making this issue one of fundamental school reform as the inclusion of children with disabilities ages birth to six in community-based childcare and preschool settings is a legal mandate and civil right articulated by natural and least restrictive environment provisions in the statutes mentioned above. However, from the theory of educational change it is well known that at the centre of transforming the process in education is the need to change the values, understanding, and actions of individual people (Fullan & Stiegelhauer, 1991). Over the last few years in our country, many schools have taken up the challenge of confronting and managing the demands of diversity as the community's needs evolved and changed and a single education system put in place.

In summary, preschool inclusion is an internationally embraced programme approach, with a strong ethical, humanistic and equalitarian value base. Inclusion is also, in general, in accordance with what behavioural and educational science demonstrates as positive conditions for promoting development, learning and social participation. In the specific case of developmental and functional differences, however, research and practice also point to potential barriers to achieving such goals (UNICEF, 2006). To achieve such changes, inclusive education must be seen as a concern for individual preschools, parents and children and as a challenge for the whole socio-cultural ecosystem, of which preschool and school is but a part (Guralnick, 2005) as well as for society at large (UNESCO, 2005).

Fortunately, many proactive parents, caregivers, educators, and other similar-minded people in other sectors, do not wait for a political decision. They act to take important steps to providing better care for these children. Parents form support groups. Non-government organizations build networks. Progressive schools implement innovative programs that others don't dare to use. Slowly, these brave few manage to gain success as more and more studies prove that programs for children with special needs can succeed even without government support and despite all the challenges. In order to better understand the dynamics of early childhood inclusive programs and to cultivate a context of inclusive education and care in a Filipino context, the researchers chose a qualitative research approach which is gaining increased attention as a preferred method to study community-based practices in various disciplines including early intervention, education, and care (Maxwell, 1996; Sandall, Smith, McLean, & Ramsey, 2002).

Moreover, there exist a few Philippine, specifically in Region VI, studies that report the culture of preschool inclusive education. Such information is necessary to develop a body of knowledge that can assist in further planning for implementing appropriate and systematized inclusive education program as well as ascertain information about essential supports for meaningful, continuous, and ultimately fundamental transformations of educating ALL learners in the 21st century.

Theoretical Framework and Research Problem

This study is anchored on the cognitive democratic/'critical pedagogy/' 'radical democratic' theory of Tony Knight (1999) with seven critical constructs or attributes. These are: 1) the nature of educational authority, 2) the ordering and inclusiveness of membership, 3) the determination of important knowledge, 4) the definition and availability of rights, 5) the nature of participation in decisions that affect one's life, 6) the creation of an optimum environment for learning, and 7) equality. It is the entwining of these different democratic requirements that will determine whether the school and classroom are able to become more 'inclusive', more democratic. The long-term goal for the democratic classroom is that all students, upon completion of secondary schooling are capable of fulfilling the requirements of an informed, active, and responsible democratic citizen (Knight, 1999). Whether a school is able to become more 'inclusive', will work to the extent that it draws on a solid body of evidence and the theory is so logically constructed as to be readily and universally understood

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the school. With the main research question of: “To what extent that the inclusive educational programs of these two schools safeguard the right of appropriate education of children with disabilities?” Particularly, the study explored: (a)The practices and policies of the schools that enable inclusive education; (b)The experiences of the stakeholders in the right to inclusive education; (c)The innovative strategies utilized by the school administrations and teaching force in upholding the right to have ; and (d) The outcome of inclusion on the school and community culture.

Methodology

Research Method

Case study method was used in this study. A case study can be viewed as “an in-depth study of interactions of a single instance in an enclosed system” (Opie, 2005). For this paper, the focus of a case study is on a real situation with real people in an environment familiar to the researcher (Opie, 2004). A case study must be methodically prepared and the collection of evidence must be systematically undertaken (Opie, 2004). The observational method is the chosen method to understand another culture whereas, the case study is used to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena (Yin, 2003). Using the case study method allowed for exploration of actions and events over the participants over prolonged number of time in natural setting; providing a deeper understanding of their student teaching life (Yin, 2003).

Setting

In this study, two Inclusive Schools were selected which are located in two provinces and cities in Panay Island, Region 6, Philippines. School A is located in a suburban part of Roxas City, Capiz and School B is located in the suburban area of Iloilo City, Iloilo.

School A is offering pre and elementary school programs from 1993 and started its inclusion program last 1997. For school year 2014-2015, the school has 148 students enrolled with 21 faculty and staff. School B is offering pre, elementary and high school programs with 206 enrolled students for school year 2014-2015 and 45 faculty and staff. It was founded in 1997 and became an inclusive school since 2003. Schools A and B were both privately-owned school and duly accredited by the Department of Education since it was founded.

Both schools were particularly chosen by the researchers for the following reasons: Firstly, the administration expressed an interest in teacher and school development for the enhancement of education and engagement for all students. Secondly, both schools think in terms of inclusive education as its underlying philosophy which emphasized the bringing together of diverse learners, their families and educators to create a school experience based on the principles of inclusive education. Thirdly, both schools follows a trans-disciplinary philosophy (Giangreco, 2002) where all members of the team commit themselves to teach and work across disciplinary boundaries to provide integrated services for the students.

Participants

Learners, Teachers, Parents/Guardians and Paraprofessionals/Caregivers. For both schools, a total 28 adults participated in the study –10 parents/guardians (with and without a child with special needs), 13 teachers and five paraprofessionals/caregivers.

All of the 28 participating adults represented a broad range of capability. All 13 were exposed to inclusive education system of their respective schools for more than a year. All paraprofessionals/caregivers were female. The highest degree earned by most of the paraprofessionals/caregivers was high school diploma and mostly reported they had received training to work with children with disabilities through the preschool where they currently work. Most of the parents were mothers; two fathers an auntie guardian. Moreover, seven learners were casually observed and interviewed in the course of the study. These learners were a combination of children with and without disabilities.

The partakers were purposively chosen for the study for the reason that they are particularly useful in the context of the study and are the major stakeholders who are involved in designing, giving, receiving, or administering the program being deliberate (Given, 2008).

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

In-depth and semi-structured interviews with study participants, on-site observations, focus group discussions, document and archival exploration were used during the span the student teaching period to craft communal and substantive accounts grounded on the stories of those who are deeply involved in the inclusive programs of both schools. Qualitative analysis was comprised of analysis of similarities and differences, coding and categorizing, and constant comparison (Lunenberg and Irby, 2008). Creswell (2007) divides data analysis in an ethnographic case study into five parts: 1) data managing, 2) coding and developing themes, 3) describing, 4) interpreting, and 5) representing. The researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles that spiral upward, in a process that allows him or her to produce a continually more detailed analysis. The researchers enter with data as text and exits with an account or narrative (Creswell, 2007). This analytic process contrasts with the more linear line of reasoning found in quantitative analysis.

Findings and Discussions

Practices and policies of the schools that enable inclusive education.

“We attended Pre – enrolment Orientation required by the school, also the IEP meeting with my family including grandparents and caregivers also discussed the barriers that prevent the school from full an inclusive school and a list of ways to overcome these barriers. We also signed the Parents and School Partnership Contract.” - Parent

“Inclusive Education System”

The policies of the school provide the backbone to curriculum changes which is transforming the whole learning environment. The major thrust of the school had reoriented existing educational programs to address not only curriculum changes but the thrust of integrating inclusive, and equitable education for sustainable development programs into all aspects of children’s learning.

Policies provides supports to the advocacy of extensive networking and interactions among parents, guardians, caregivers, management and faculty of the school through capability building activities like Parent Education Program and Caregiver’s Training. This multi-stakeholders partnerships and linkages are particularly effective as evident in their engagement in school indoor and outdoor activities.

These deep and intensive interaction between and among the stakeholders are evident in the pattern of the school system that reflects three stages. These patterns are embedded in the policies and practices that are observed, complied with Before Enrolment Stage, Entry Stage, Implementation and Transition Stage.

The school program reflects the whole institution supports to the whole child, whole school and whole community approach for sustainable development. The system is composed of three stages:

Entry Stage

Pre- enrolment System. Pre – enrolment orientation provides an overview of mission, vision statement and policies about inclusive learning- friendly education, including a policy against discrimination. The school conducts regular in-house campaigns to encourage parents to enroll their children only, if and when they can commit themselves as partners as such emphasize that in this school all children should be welcome. Parents are empowered and informed of their resources at national or regional levels that address inclusive and equitable education for children with diverse background and abilities. Also during this stage, the school program's orientation discusses the barriers that prevent the school from full implementation of an inclusive school and a list of ways to overcome these barriers. The Parents and School Partnership Contract is also discussed and explained to the parents prior to the child's enrolment.

Enrolment System

Placement and Profiling. While the parents are learning about the school's program the child will be assessed for Basic Skills, if the child has shown delays based on the age-appropriate milestone the child will be recommended for an assessment by the Developmental Pediatrician. However, the child who is assessed and performed at par to its developmental milestone will be endorsed to its age-appropriate educational placement. The basic assessment record will be the baseline for the child's profiling.

Family Conference and IEP Meeting. After enrolment orientation, learning facilitators (Inclusive and Special Education Teachers), Family members (Parent's, Caregivers, siblings, grandparents, etc.), and specialists from other disciplines (if needed) discuss the IEP and explains multi- disciplinary approach to the parents on how we can work collaborate and work together with other Government and Non – Government Agencies.

Signing the Seal of Parent's Pledge of Commitment. The signing of Parent's Pledge of Commitment seals the collaboration of the multi-stakeholders and embarks the series of transformation of minds and capability building activities to equip and empower the stakeholders. The school policy also stipulates that if the parents failed to meet the six levels of Parents' Engagement Standards, the school can mandate the termination of the contract.

Implementation Stage

The innovative strategies in support of these policies were carefully designed and implemented by school administration and teaching force in upholding the right to have an inclusive education.

Evaluation-Transition Stage

At this stage, child had either finished the program or the parents decided to terminate the program. The school then provides;

Evaluation for Transition. Feedback with collaborators and the parents where progress of the child are discussed; preparation of guidelines for the transfer to another environment which include the goal setting with parents and the child and support in identifying learners friendly-schools if not accommodating the needs of the child.

Advocacy for Inclusive Education for Children's Transition. Facilitate, negotiate and advocate to school authorities the right of children with special needs as most schools are yet to implement Inclusive or Special Education Program.

Set-up Monitoring System. The monitoring system is designed to help and guide the child and the parents once a child is accepted or enrolled to his new learning environment.

"Teacher and Staff Development Program"

This collaborative process of nurturing each other had established a culture that foster creativity and confidence and promotes the sharing of duties and responsibilities. Teachers' trainings reflect that trainings can bring about changes they want to see from the planners to the implementers to address the mindsets and attitudes that maybe preventing change- that what they believe about purpose of education affects what they teach and how they teach. The on-going staff development for the teachers are venues to be able to nurture among teachers a sense of self- esteem, a desire to learn and grow, the ability to reflect about themselves and their perspectives and deeper sense of motivation to be a part of transformative process, and a love to teach children. Teacher realizes that the major change start within themselves if they want to bring change in the child, in school and in the community.

Trainings are done in ways that are inspiring and exciting for the teachers, to make the training active and enjoyable and to make it really practical to really help teachers know how to change. Through these sessions, "teacher's voice" is heard in different avenues of continuous learning to develop their competence in knowledge, values, attitudes and skills: Knowledge is gained through seminars and workshops that continually equip teachers in teaching children with special needs; Staff development every month; fieldtrips and researches for latest science-based teaching approaches to create and evaluate better curriculum design. Values and attitudes and skills are molded and developed where support activities like advance professional training on regular basis; ongoing support for developing teaching and learning materials related to inclusive education and ongoing support for improving their understanding of subject matter and how each subject is interrelated and integrated in our everyday life in line with sustainable education.

Experiences of the stakeholders in the right to inclusive education.

"I am aware that the school has a Brain- Based, Environment and Culture- based though the following venues: PEP Session – discussing the structure of the brain which affects the functions of the brain, IEP, Learning Style, Differentiated Curriculum, Multiple Intelligence, Neuro-Developmental Profile and Social-Emotional curriculum during staff development we are trained to be stewards of environment." – Teacher

“Teaching as a way of life – respecting diversity and cultural differences”

Teachers’ attitudes as stated in the results are participatory-emancipatory in nature and constructivist which reflects the respect for diversity. They are not only dynamic and hybrid teachers, but also teachers who have the passion to lead a change which starts with the within themselves in making a difference in the life of their student, to the lives of the people in the community.

“Coaching and Mentorship Experience: Children as the center of the curriculum”

Data shows that Teachers conducted regular capability skills to parents and community in developing an inclusive classroom and home that is disability friendly. Children’s activities were designed to expose and experiences the real life situation in safety and basic life skills such fire drill, traffic safety, typhoon preparedness, land mapping and beach clean-up. These activities ensure children to learn safety and to execute it when it’s necessary.

Children’s role in advocacy in the city’s program is part of their social contribution in keeping their future guarded as shown in the Reading Campaign advocacy, as part of their age-appropriate contribution to help other children learn to love reading especially to children who can’t afford to buy books. Basically, children are taught to be a part of the solution even at an early age. Outreach Programs varies in children ages 1.6 months to 12 year-old student activities such as Adopt -A-friend Day, Gift-giving, Feeding and Crisis Programs to name a few.

Innovative strategies utilized by the school administrations and teaching force in upholding the right to have inclusive education.

“The school’s Home Program addresses Self-awareness Activities, Self – Management (Routines, Self-Skills, Adaptive Living Skills) like chore checklist and daily activities. Math taught at home using found objects at home which I learned from a workshop in school.” – Parent

‘Connecting Classroom subjects to real community issues’

Learners used real tools and real materials to collaboratively construct real world applications of this knowledge to be relevant in their daily activities at home. Thus both school and community became learning environment where students discover, embrace creativity and integrate authentic learning experiences to create and design real-world applications of this knowledge.

“Home- Based Program/ Parent Education Program/ Caregivers Program”

School offers Home-based Program guided by the neuroscience findings so that the Functional Curriculum can be implemented and monitored by the child’s first teacher-parents.

Parent’s Education Program. Collated data shows the following seminars and workshops required to attend and implement at home by the parents; The Important Role of the Family and Dynamics of Partnership with the school; Orientation of How the Brain Works; Orientation on Reading Pyramid Skills ; Personalized Home Program (Language –Rich Program); and Parents Education Program (Discussion of Home Program).

Home Visits. Inventory measures the quality and quantity of stimulation and support available to a child in the home environment. Teachers identified the home environment inventory to check the home's physical set-up and create a plan on how to transform it into a Language Rich- Environment and support to answer the need of the whole child development.

Parent's Workshops. Qualitative data shows that the series of workshops on developmentally appropriate materials and activities for Parents and Caregivers helped the parents and child achieve a learning stimulating environment.

Children's Participation in Community Real-Time Issues

The challenge that schools face today is how can school's curriculum response to what's happening on the world responding to issues real time. The schools' curriculum shifted from the traditional classroom of having teachers organize things before teaching to preparing the students to real world that is flexible and unpredictable. Bringing the children to real situations in the community to experience and to create solutions, issues concerning children's right to education and inclusion, health and safe environment and sustainable development

Outcomes of inclusion on the school and community culture.

"The lessons we learned in this school, are also relayed to other caregivers we met in our everyday lives. And they are surprised by the lessons we are telling them and they become curious about it." – Caregiver

"Advocacy and Commitment"

The School program promotes the advocacy and increased recognition of the need for Inclusive Education as essential component to the advancement of education for sustainable development at the local and eventually in the national level. There is a growing commitment among teachers, parents and caregivers to be a part of the social advocacy so that rights of child with need should be protected.

"Visibility and Culture of Diversity"

The program makes children with special needs visible not only in school but in the community which was proven to be effective with the active participation of multi-stakeholders. With this visibility, a Culture of Diversity was established and deepened in the school and being expanded to the community.

Conclusion

The core of the School Wide Inclusive Program translates essential educational theories into classroom practices. These practices places much weight on the process – "How will they learn" than "What to learn". These practices require the awareness of the most arduous development of being a person, the development of strengths, abilities, limitations and weaknesses as a human being and being able to see, to listen, and to think critically in order to solve real problems thus developing flexibility to deal with the diverse world. It also highlights collaboration to come up with creative and responsive solutions in dealing with real issues, problems, challenges and demands of the society.

In general, based on the theoretical framework of the study, the school wide inclusive program becomes a venue for the students, the parents and the community members to become learners and solvers of real issues about economy, society and environment. The program aims to bridge the devastating gap between public and private interest and brings about realization to the schools' stakeholders that they are the ones, collectively, "leading" the school with the sense of community and belongingness. Moreover, the program promotes the expanding of the opportunities for people who used to be marginalized that they should be "IN" in planning and solving the challenges that directly affect them.

The program, not only makes a school as an institution that conveys knowledge, but an active entity, resource and living proof for the community and society in realizing the statement "It takes a community to raise a child".

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