

Inclusive Education for Differently-Abled Learners: Perspectives of Administrators and Teachers

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Abstract: *A growing number of differently-abled pupils are seeking the acceptance and understanding of the regular schools that will grant them the chance to be enrolled as a regular student despite the odds that their disability might bring to the unvarying school situations. The study examined and described the lived experiences of the school personnel on the implementation of inclusive education in private schools. Data gathered through unstructured interviews and observations were presented using the narrative research design. The researcher included the experiences she had with her son who was diagnosed with mild autism who has far-reaching experiences on how inclusive education has helped him develop into a better individual. Most of the data were obtained through the life stories of the key informants of the study. Reflecting on the gathered data, differently-abled learners get maximized learning and socializing opportunities when given the chance to learn with their classmates. At the same time, the school personnel provided some unique perspectives in dealing with the implementation of inclusive education on their part.*

Keywords—inclusive education, differently-abled learners, lived experiences, life stories

1. INTRODUCTION

Education in all its forms and diversity, when captivated by the human soul, has the boundless capacity to alter history. This has been proven since time immemorial, when countless great men and women in times past, through education, have contributed greatly to the growth and expansion of our society. It is also a fundamental skill that is being developed from different fields of profession. Thus, education is one of the components in the development of professional attributes, skills, work ethics among others [1] [2] [3].

To safeguard everyone's right to this contributory cause, the General Assembly of the United Nations, on December 10, 1948, adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A great component of this rule is stated in Article 26 which clearly expresses that everyone has the right to education [4].

According to a great leader from South Africa "Education is the most powerful weapon that can be used to change the world" [5]. The power and significance of education have been the most preferred area under discussion by scholars and people from all walks of life all over the world. It is therefore everyone's advocacy that education is one of the most basic human rights one must not be deprived of. As stipulated in the 1987 Philippine Constitution "The State shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels, and shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all" [6].

Suffice it to say that education must not be withheld from anyone, especially to learners who involuntarily could not conform to the standards set by society. They are depicted either as disabled or mentally ill. Fortunately, nowadays, persons with disabilities specifically children and those with special needs like kids affected with Autism

Spectrum Disorder (ASD) worldwide are being given sufficient attention as compared to about almost 70 years ago. According to an American Psychiatrist who is the very first to describe autism in 1944,

"Autism didn't exist before that year as far as clinicians were concerned, and its official prevalence was, therefore, zero. There were, obviously, people with autism, but they were simply considered insane" [7].

The labels, such as autistic, mentally retarded, deaf, mute, and the like that people use to identify persons with disabilities especially the school-aged children are now regarded as improper due to the stigma it gives to the child. These children are now better called differently-abled learners.

An international agency established that:

"In the Philippines, there are very few schools that accept children with disabilities because of lack of school facilities and appropriately trained teachers. At the time of the study, there are about 94 special education institutions (including The Philippine National School for the Blind, National School for the Deaf, and other private institutions), 14 special education centers which are set up within existing schools, 19 boarding schools, 2 hospital schools and 4,292 special education classes in public schools. 23 schools have an integrated education program and in areas where Community-based Rehabilitation (CBR) services are provided, schools have integrated education (as of 1993). Those persons with disabilities who receive education in educational facilities are limited. The majority of them does not go to school or go to school but are not certified as children with disabilities, or are not receiving education due to the lack of educational facilities" [8]

But a glimmer of hope dawned as one Senator of the Republic of the Philippines filed Senate Bill No. 996, also known as the "Inclusive Education for Children and Youth with Special Needs Act of 2016", it is an ambitious move to include millions of children with special needs into the public education system of our country through a comprehensive inclusive education policy framework. In this bill, the Senator stressed that:

"Every child has the right to an education commensurate with their abilities and the development of their skills for the improvement of his capacity for service to themselves and their countrymen," [9]

Differently-abled children range from mild to severe and they need a lot of help from the outside world. Educators play a significant role in helping those children achieve their full potential. They need all the help they can get to be as high functioning as possible so that soon, they will not be a burden to the society but an asset and a great contributor to our country's development, after all, most of the differently-abled children are gifted with exceptional intelligence and abilities. They have great potential in them but the society, especially the educators need to take part in helping them unleash their full potential through inclusive education.

Inclusive education is ways to help differently-abled children because they will be given a chance to mingle, work, study, and grow with other typically developing kids. Their experiences will aid them to learn how to cope with the demands of social interaction and learning skills.

According to UNICEF's annual State of the World's Children's report in 2013, the Inclusion of special needs children benefits society as a whole [10]. When we concentrate on the abilities and potential of children with disabilities (CWDs), it would create benefits for society as a whole. "When you see the disability before the child, it is not only wrong for the child, but it deprives society of all that child has to offer," [11].

A great reason why the researcher proposes this study is she hopes to bring to light the many advantages of inclusive education for the differently-abled children. These advantages will be an important tool that will help these children to become part of society's success as well as their own.

In a department memorandum which reiterated that the Philippines has only served 2% of the targeted 2.2 million children with disabilities in the country who live without access to a basic human right: the right to education [12]. It is therefore a challenging task for the Public Schools to fully and effectively implement the regulations stated in the aforementioned circular.

The educational system in our country largely depends not on public schools alone but private schools as well. Another reason for the researcher in pursuing the goal of this research is to intensify the current practices of the Private schools in offering inclusive education for the enhanced academic development of children. This research may be of help to the private schools in solving the insurmountable

lack and difficulties in the implementation of inclusive education. It is the mission of the Department of Education to fully "embrace the philosophy of accepting all children regardless of race, size, shape, color, ability or disability" [12] both the public and the private schools may go hand in hand to understand how the growing number of children with disability or the differently-abled children may acquire the benefit of inclusive education. It is along with this premise, the researcher being an educator and a mother of a child with special needs deemed it important to pursue this study.

1.1 Research Problem

The general problem of the study is: How does inclusive education provide for the academic development of differently-abled learners in private schools in Bulacan?

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What guidelines and intervention programs are being implemented by private schools on inclusive education for differently-abled learners?
2. What specific problems have school administrators and teachers encountered in providing inclusive education?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The researcher chose the phenomenological method, 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 particular phenomenon [13].

The researcher chose to also utilize the narrative research design because when people tell stories to researchers, they feel listened to. Narrative Design is a form of qualitative research that uses an individual's stories in conducting and evaluating research [14].

The use of transcripts in qualitative, emphasizing the idea that "it is by way of these transcribing narrative research transcribed accounts of the researcher-participant exchange that analysts hope to re-live each research event and draw meaningful interpretations from the data." The creation and use of transcriptions, however, take on special meaning in narrative research where the primary goal is to maintain the narrative as a whole unit.

2.2 Participants

The informants of this study are from 3 private school administrators and 5 teachers. In the interviews done, the researcher has extracted information regarding their experiences in their journey with the differently-abled learners as they are placed in regular school for inclusive education. The researcher understands that the goal of phenomenological research is to describe and elaborate on

the essential meaning of her participants' lived experience [15].

2.3 Research Instrument

An unstructured Interview is the research instrument that has been used in data-gathering in this qualitative study. The researcher used a person-to-person format. In the unstructured interview, open-ended questions in the conversational format are determined before the interview. During the interview, the researcher has asked the same questions for all the participants, but the order of the questions, the exact wording, and the type of follow-up questions may vary considerably.

The researcher has established rapport with the informants at first to gain their trust for them to open up freely. The researcher was also alert to both verbal and nonverbal messages and flexible in rephrasing and pursuing certain lines of questioning. Taking notes on these observations during the interview was used by the researcher.

2.4 Confidentiality

The researcher has given confidentiality with utmost importance. All the documents acquired, one-one interviews with the informants, interview transcripts were sanitized for all the personal information of the informants to secure and maintain their confidentiality and privacy.

2.5 Recording

All the informants were given the preference to have their interview either audio or video recorded. The researcher has explained well the importance of video or audio recording but did not insist once the informants are not comfortable with it. In this case, the researcher used her field notes to record some of the information from the interviews.

2.6 Duration of the Study

This study was conducted in the last quarter of 2017 up to the 3rd grading period of the school Year 2017-2018. Interviews will be arranged at the beginning of the 3rd quarter in October 2017. By the end of the 3rd quarter of the school year, data will be spent on the analysis and consultation with the subjects and informants for gaps and missing information in the data collected.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The external Environment of differently-abled children plays a crucial role in shaping their psychological and intellectual personality. The environment can either make or break a child's well-being. In this regard, parents as the primary caregivers of the child hold a highly important role.

They are to be more aware of the environment that surrounds their child.

Both physical and social environmental factors within the home can affect a child's development. Physical factors include the housing structure and home density, physical items in the home, the quality and characteristics of the home, the predictability of daily routines, residential mobility, and the availability of resources [16].

Adjustment to these factors is not too complicated for a typically developing child but for a differently-abled child, it connotes an entirely different story. Since they cannot regulate what happens to them due to sensory issues and slow processing of their mind, what seems to be easy will turn out to be a herculean task indeed! It could either help them improve or it may also cause them to regress. What is going on in their environment is a big deal for a differently-abled child.

A regular school as we all know is a whole new world for a differently-abled child. In here, people will not walk another mile or turn another cheek to understand them. Unlike in the home and therapy centers, that may be likened to an aquarium where the fishes are protected and fed. The school is like the whole ocean with too many sea creatures who will not care whether one can swim or not.

Although there are school administrators and teachers who are expected to take care of the child with special needs, still, majority of the students are not yet mature enough to understand that they have a classmate who needs to be understood and reached out in an accepting and empathetic way. In a study, different factors are affecting the performance of teachers [17]. But then again, this kind of attitude could not be taken against them. Other students in a regular school would just act the way they know and understand. They are not aware that their survival instinct is somewhat offending and upsetting to the differently-abled children, especially to the observing parent.

Nevertheless, it is to be foreseen that everyone understands that we are living in a very complicated world, where people live not according to what is expected of them, but according to how they view their world.

3.1 School Administrators and Principals

The school administrators and Principals are the ones who will decide on the culture that will prevail in their Institutions. The decision of whether the school will accept a differently-abled child depends on them as the one who directs the future of the school in inclusive education.

The principal is usually the key player in ensuring that an inclusive philosophy is in place in a school. As one teacher stated in "Learning Together" by Donna Bracewell, "I couldn't have made it through some of those rough spots this year if my principal hadn't been backing me every step of the way" [18].

On their shoulder lies the great responsibility of whether or not the culture of inclusive education be embraced by the institution or not.

In a study entitled “Developing policies for inclusive education: a study of the role of local education authorities” [19], it was clearly stated that “In many parts of the world there is evidence of initiatives aimed at finding ways of creating forms of mainstream schooling that can respond to learners with disabilities and others seen as having special educational needs.

The researcher has known and observed many private schools within the community during the years that her son is in inclusive education. There was even a time that her son was not accepted as Grade 1 in a certain private school just because he has a “condition”. Another school is friendly and accepted the child but in the years that follow, they bluntly told the parents with differently-abled children that they cannot accept students like them anymore because they simply cannot meet their needs.

Most of these schools are not knowledgeable and are not ready to handle the differently-abled learners to receive inclusive education in their school. They may have accepted some of these students but they are at a loss on how to deal with the problems and difficulties along the way. It takes passion and determination to fight for noble advocacy such as this. The researcher is happy and fulfilled to find private schools with an exceptional and highly qualified school administrator that shares the same burden and passion to do the things others won't even try to do.

The School Teachers

The school teachers are said to be the second mother of each pupil in the school. They are the ones who execute the lessons that the students must grasp and learn each day. According to a researcher, there are different motivating factors for teachers in developing supplementary learning materials [20]. They try their best to become a good teacher to all their students, though they may experience difficulty in adjusting to their different learning needs, the call to duty will push them to do their work dutifully. But sometimes teachers can be bullied not only by students [21] [22] [23] but also by parents and the community because of the difficult task which is ahead of them.

Handling the differences of their students concerning their learning style and needs is incomparable with the patience they have to muster in managing a differently-abled student enrolled in their class. Thus, remediation activities are also essentially helpful for differently-abled students [24]. In this regard, the heart of a true teacher manifests in the worst and best situation in a daily school setting.

School 1

At the entrance gate of the school, you can already sense and feel the orderliness and tranquility of the place. They have a lady guard and not a brusque male bouncer who greets you at the gate. The researcher considers in her mind that the people in the school indeed are trained to be peaceful and law-abiding, to not need someone to solve a possible daily violent or chaotic occurrence. It is quite small in space and the number of classrooms. But it is ideal for the

number of students they cater for the moment. The observations made has been a remarkable one. Students are well behaved as the researcher interviews with the classroom teachers. Several differently-abled students are included inside a regular classroom that contains less than 20 students. They patiently waited for the interview to finish as they approach the time for their recess. One can readily identify the differently-abled children inside a small class size classroom as they appear quirky and unusually insensitive to their environment. But the school seemed to have developed the culture of accommodating and understanding the odd children as they would call them. The teacher relates that the classes are not disrupted whenever a differently-abled child would throw tantrums and is having a meltdown for whatever reason at any time of the day. They have a rule that once a child needs time to calm down and collect himself, they have the option to send that child to the principal's office, not to be punished or reprimanded but to enjoy the peace the office does bring.

The researcher has observed that the Principal's office is relatively unconventional. With few regular-sized office tables and the aura is not intimidating. Inside the office is an area where students who are brought there may be guided by a teacher for a one on one study. A big table, small chairs, and a bookshelf were neatly placed. When asked about why this extra room is included in the admin office, the Principal quips, "So that I could be in touch on how these kids are being managed. Being a graduate of Master of Arts in Special Education, the school head can make the differently-abled children enrolled in their school their Individualized Education Program (IEP). He is therefore a hands-on person in the academic learning of these children.

Their school has been the home of differently-abled children since they started in 1995 as a tutorial and development center. The knowledge that the school principal has gained from the many years of experience became his weapon in winning the many challenges that they face as the school tirelessly provides accommodation for the students who may be rejected by other schools because of their disability.

The principal admitted that their school does not have written rules and regulations regarding the accommodation of differently-abled children for inclusive education at the moment. But their current practices include interviews with the parent and the child upon application for enrolment. They are asked to submit a doctor's and therapist's recommendation that the child is ready to be included in a regular school. An admission test was also administered by the school to assess the level of intelligence and the proper placement of the differently-abled pupil. Being the school head entails a lot of work, most of the works to be done seem an extra mile because he is the one who makes the IEP (Individualized Education Program) of the differently-abled students who were enrolled in their school. He would see to it that the child is evaluated properly until they determine which appropriate level the child belongs to.

School 2

School 2 may be considered as big in terms of population. They cater to about 300 or more students in each school year. As one may think that a school like this will not more likely to accommodate differently-abled children. With a class size of 25 students in each classroom, even a developmental pediatrician would not agree that a differently-abled child will favorably adjust and adapt to such an environment. But big as they are, this school has what it takes to cater to a differently-abled child...the heart that is willing to help.

In the school premises, the researcher has observed that children and some parents in the waiting area knew each other and they are closely knit as they see and greet each other on corridors and playgrounds. The principal relates that in the last 15 years that the school has existed, they were able to maintain that friendly environment without paying too much attention to the ranking that the students get in their academic standing. It is probably one of the reasons why the school became welcoming to the differently-abled. Yet the school principal said, "they can only do so much". This means that they can't be the solution for all the problems and they cannot perfectly accommodate every child that needs help. But they are known for being helpful to these students. Most of the parents are thankful for the accommodation that they provide. Despite the big class size, differently-abled children in this school are coping quite well. It has been possible because the School Principal believed in the advocacy on the equal rights of children. She majors in family and counseling in her graduate studies that is why she maintains a well-balanced orientation on how to deal with children of all ages and abilities. She has been an advocate of giving impartial treatment and respect to all children more so for the differently-abled. She is also connected to giving such services to special kids in her hometown in Pampanga where she shares a business with her sister, a sped center that caters to the needs and management of children with special needs. It has been a part of her life her daughter has just passed the licensure examination for Occupational Therapy.

This greater knowledge has led her to be on her toes when dealing with special children in their school. She sees to it that each child is well managed and directed properly by the school teacher.

School 3

It is the school managed by the researcher. The institution started with one thing in mind, to be able to connect and serve the community. Although the school is business in nature, the management team has not forgotten that serving the community would mean sacrifices and hard work.

Since it is a church-school, both the institutions share the same building. It is a relatively small place for less than a hundred students from pre-school to grade 6. Because of its size and friendly atmosphere, the school was often recommended by therapy centers around the place. For about

a decade, it has been the second home of differently-abled children enrolled for inclusive education. Word of mouth had it as a tool where other parents learn that the school accepted differently-abled kids and effectively managed their academic learning and behavior.

It was never a spotless journey, there was a time that the researcher had to talk to the parents of a child who exhibits violent behavior patterns. Heartbreaking as it may seem, the school is not able to perfectly handle everyone who needs help. Though many times, the inclusion is repeatedly successful for others, one or two children must drop out of schooling because the school staff cannot handle the student anymore and had to be referred to a therapist. With a promise that once the child is ready and able to study in a group, the school will welcome the student once he comes back.

The school however developed a culture of acceptance and love for the differently-abled children. These children were never discriminated against in any way. They are included in just about every program that the school conducts. Be it a dance or song number, they are given a fair chance to have full participation in every activity. There are accommodations that the school is careful planning. One example is about an academic week where the students will have to compete in groups. The teachers are careful to put the differently-abled child into a group with supportive leaders and members. They may not perform very well and there were times that they cry at the slightest problems that the group has been facing, but they enjoy being a child and being one of the kids who doesn't have to be different at all.

Through the years, the school has been faithful in gearing the children to practice equality and fairness, accepting and loving each other as individuals, and trying to show that everyone can have a shot in anything that one is good at.

Academic performance was awarded every quarter. As always, the differently-abled child continuously receives awards for academic excellence. These children, with the proper guidance, will always show to the world what they got.

The researcher has conducted a one-on-one interview with the school principals of the 2 schools as informants of the study. Included in the following accounts is the researcher's own experiences being the 3rd school respondent regarding the brighter side of inclusive education for differently-abled learners. The following are some of the summaries of the informants' responses:

Question: What are the existing policies, guidelines, or current practices of your school on inclusive education?

Admin 1: We do not have written rules and regulations regarding the accommodation of differently-abled children for inclusive education at the moment. But it is very much a part of our plan that hopefully this coming school year, we will be able to just add some pages to our student handbook

to clearly state the school's rules and regulations on that area. But our current practice includes interviews with the parent and the child upon application for enrolment. They are asked to submit a doctor's and therapist's recommendation that the child is ready to be included in a regular school. An admission test will also be administered to the child to assess the level of intelligence and the proper placement of the differently-abled pupil.

Admin 2: Being a graduate of the Master of Arts in Special Education, I am the one who makes the IEP (Individualized Education Program) of the differently-abled students admitted to our school. I would start a one-on-one session with the child until we determine which appropriate level the child must belong into. We then place the child in the classroom but we closely monitor the child's progress.

Admin 3: "Being the principal, I am the one who decides on the placement of the student. But there is an agreement between the school and the parents that if ever the student will not be able to cope with the demands of the day to day experiences of the child in the regular school setting, we will opt to pull out the child from the school if that will be the better option. But the goal will always be to assist the differently-abled child to lessen the burden of the adjustment period. We are in constant coordination and communication with the parents and therapists to help the differently-abled children cope with inclusive education".

Question: What are the existing intervention programs implemented in your school for the inclusive education of differently-abled learners?

The following interventions are provided by the 3 schools to aid differently-abled learners to cope with the rigorous adjustment of inclusive education:

Admin 1: "We apply spontaneous adjustment and classroom management. We see to it that the classroom is closely monitored especially in classes where differently-abled learners are enrolled. We are always ready to adjust if needed. I have also tried not to put a label on the newly enrolled differently-abled child to prevent pre-conceived ideas on the part of the teacher. I wish to see if there will be a difference if the teacher was not informed at once about the child's condition. But eventually, the teacher would notice the irregularity of the child's behavior compared to his/her peers. We also want to make sure that the differently-abled children will catch up properly so we made days of exam lengthier than the days given to the typically developing kids. In our school, we don't put rankings on the honor students to avoid stiff unnecessary competition among them. That is why it causes no problems with parents who are conscious of grades and honor roll ranking".

Admin 2: "We make arranged seat plan for differently-abled kids. We usually place these children in the seat close

to the teacher so that the child may be assisted in whatever lessons or instructions he cannot understand. Aside from that, instructions are given by the teacher, and lessons are given in smaller chunks so that the differently-abled pupil may not have a hard time grasping the concept of the lesson. We have continuous collaborative effort among the teacher, therapist, and parent. If ever the child encounters a problem in any area of their schooling, we act as an intervention team for the differently-abled students. We are considering putting up a resource room that will add to the intervention program that we give to the differently-abled children enrolled in our school. The resource room will serve as a room managed by a teacher to accommodate the differently-abled who had a hard time adjusting at the moment. It will serve as a temporary shelter for the child who is having a hard time with the group. The child may go back to the regular classroom once they feel better and is already calmed down".

Admin 3: It has been our practice ever since our school started that we provide a place for the differently-abled children a place to collect themselves in case of unpleasant behavior is evident due to some problems in the room. I used the principal's office for that. Since I know sped teaching, I act as a guide to the teacher who handles the children being sent to my office oftentimes because of misbehavior and meltdowns during class hours. I give them ample time to relax and calm down and complete their seatwork or anything that they did not finish inside the classroom. I also make sure that the snacks and lunch break especially in a class with differently-abled children are well guided by the teacher. It is during break times that the children will turn out to be in their wildest and unruly. A classroom unguided by class adviser will more likely to experience problems of students with each other".

The following accounts are some of the responses gathered in a one on one interview with the teachers employed in the three schools that served as respondents

Question: What are the existing guidelines and intervention programs that you implement inside the classroom for the inclusive education of differently-abled learners?

Teacher 1: "Wala kaming specific guidelines. Ang current practice namin ay madalas na consultation sa aming principal, kapag may problema ang bata sa classroom, example ayaw mag comply sa lesson, the child will be sent to the principal's office." (We have no specific guidelines. Our current practice is our frequent consultation with the principal whenever we encounter problems like if the child won't comply with our lesson, we will send the child to the principal's office).

The principal's office is a well-lighted spacious place with a table and chairs at an accessible corner. Special needs children will be accommodated in the office in case they are

having a meltdown. They bring the schoolwork with them so that a teacher will teach them on a one on one basis.

Teacher 2: "I am blessed to have worked with my current employer. Our school has a passion to handle and manage the children with a special need who are enrolled in us. Although there are no specific guidelines or rules that were given for us to follow on the management of differently-abled students, the moral support and advocacy of the school are very high".

Teacher 3: "Some of the intervention programs I implement inside the classroom for the inclusive education of differently-abled learners are the following: providing daily routines, classroom rules, break activities, time outs for bad behavior and rewards and merits for good behavior".

Teacher 4: We give them accommodations like setting, timing, and scheduling and also specialized instructional strategies that support and enhance their learning potential.

Teacher 5: "*Itrato na hindi iba ang estudyante na differently-abled. Binibigyan ko ng pagkakataon na mag-isang gawin ang kanilang task sa loob ng classroom*". (To not discriminate against the differently-abled students. I give them the chance to finish their task in the classroom by themselves)

4. SYNTHESIS

According to a study, it is generally assumed that human beings perceive and understand the world through the senses [16]. People are being shaped by the world where they live. The personality of an individual is generally influenced by his environment. The information that is generated in the environment and transmitted into the minds of those individuals almost literally becomes a part of someone's life. In a family, for instance, a certain culture is created as they live together throughout the years. The personality of each family member grows and differs depending on how each one is raised. It is therefore important to note that environment influences behavior and development especially for children with special needs. The more that they need to thrive not only in a safe and secure environment but also in a place where challenges and difficulties will help them grow as a person that they are meant to be [16]

The regular school setting usually sets the demarcation line between denial and acceptance. Once the child begins to be unfit in an environment that most kids enjoy, everyone is faced with the reality that, probably something is wrong somewhere. While it is true that, the environment shapes the person, it may also reveal his true nature.

The revealed ideas and opinions are the lived experience of the informants as they relate their experiences associated with their external environment. The impact that they have on the lives of the differently-abled children.

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