

THE INCLUSIVE KINDERGARTEN IN THE PHILIPPINES: ACCESS AND AMPLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARLY LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Abstract : *The belief in education especially inclusive education has grown. Inclusive education nowadays is very essential specifically for diverse students who have learning needs and it is also the basis for a more unbiased society. An evaluation on how inclusive kindergarten schools implemented the inclusion of early learners with disabilities was the objective of this study. Specifically, it determined the current status on the level of implementation of inclusive education practices; evaluated the extent of attainment of the program toward achieving specific goals to expand inclusive education; recognized best practices observed in the implementation of inclusive kindergarten education program and identified the challenges met by the respondents; This research work employed the descriptive evaluative design as well as qualitative type were used to determine the challenges experienced and best practices observed in the implementation of an inclusive kindergarten program through a focus group discussion with the principals and teachers. Results showed that the level of school implementation of inclusive kindergarten program is generally observed to be very high; attainment of the program objectives/outcomes consistently yielded a high level of implementation with approximately 61%-80% target indicators implemented in one of the City School Divisions in Southern Philippines; best practices include dedication of teachers to teaching children with special needs, appropriate school environment, inservice trainings conducted to teachers handling children with special needs, curriculum modification and support of parents to inclusive education programs, while challenges met consisted of attitude of teachers towards inclusive education, workload of teachers, acceptance of parents having children with special needs, assessment and strategies in handling children with behavioral problem. Hence, the study concluded that inclusive education in one of the City School Divisions in Southern Philippines is highly implemented.*

Keywords: Inclusive, Kindergarten, Special needs

INTRODUCTION

The belief in education especially inclusive education has grown. Inclusive education nowadays is very essential specifically for diverse students who have learning needs and it is also the basis for a more unbiased society. It espouses the notion that learners irrespective of their characteristics or differences they have a right to education. Particularly, inclusive school has to encourage students with special needs and students without special needs to learn together. Therefore, students are able to acquire learning through Inclusive schools even those children with the most severe educational disabilities (Cross, Salazar, Campuzano and Batchelder, 2009).

In the Philippines, according to the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities or Republic Act 7277, stressed that persons with disabilities are guaranteed and offered suitable quality education

and sufficient opportunities to enhance their skills by the State. Moreover, persons with disabilities are given access to education as provided by the State. It also stated that it is illegal for any school not to admit a person with disability because of handicap or incapacity (National Council on Disability Affairs, 2008).

Kindergarten special education is simply intended to meet the developmental needs of every child. Special education is not a clinic or a hospital where patients are treated nor an orphanage for the orphans (Barbetta, Norona, and Bicard, 2005). Although the General Kindergarten Program contains the Inclusiveness of Kindergarten Education which caters the needs of the learners with special needs: the gifted, those with disabilities, and other diverse learners.

As a practicum supervisor of Early Childhood Education and Special Education, the

researcher found out that there are early learners with special needs being mainstreamed in regular classes specifically in kindergarten. In fact, they are placed in inclusive classes as early as five years old. Some are diagnosed with disabilities while others are simply based on the teachers' assessment. This propelled the researcher to conduct an evaluation on the inclusiveness of kindergarten program for early learners with disabilities.

The purpose of this study is to conduct an evaluation on how inclusive kindergartens in one of the school divisions of Southern Philippines implement the inclusion of early learners with disabilities. This study evaluates on the level of implementation on the inclusive kindergarten program. It also considers the extent of attainment of the program's objectives/outcomes. In addition, it contemplates on the best practices and challenges in the implementation of inclusive kindergarten program as experienced by the principals and teachers.

This help assesses the current status on the level of implementing inclusive education practices; evaluate the extent of attainment of the program, identify the challenges met by the respondents and best practices observed in the implementation of inclusive kindergarten education program. Finally, a proposal to enhance the implementation of inclusive kindergarten education program.

This study is anchored on the UNESCO's belief, (2004) that inclusive education is ethnically sensitive, accepts diversity, and inspires learning for ALL children, encourage involvement, support, and teamwork. And that also encourages healthy habit and makes children responsible in their daily lives through guided learning. Moreover, teachers have the opportunities to learn and benefit from that learning. People involved in this program learn to collaborate for the children's benefit.

Also, Jordan and McGhie-Richmond (2014), posited that inclusive practices become a style of teaching that supports all learners, rather than a supplement to regular classroom practices. In classroom management, effective teachers establish rules for routines such as starting and completing lessons, modulating classroom noise levels and student talk, and for retrieving learning materials. They establish rules for behavior and mutual respect, and provide charts as required to remind students of the classroom rules and their responsibilities to assist one another. Effective teachers had well established classroom routines for beginning and completing a lesson, handing out and collecting materials and transitions between tasks, expecting students to help each other before asking for help from the teacher, and taking some responsibility for managing their behavior and engagement in learning activities.

Further, Hughes and Pickeral (2013), stated that individuals especially children with special

needs develop their full participation in the school with the help of administrators who are willing and skillful to enhance the talent and skill of every student. Also, students acquire knowledge when they are associated with those older from them. Likewise, to ensure that everybody participates, the inclusive school has to establish a sense of belongingness which is indicated through vision and practice.

In addition, Cate, McCullough, and Peters (2010) claimed that leaders who support inclusive education by educating parents of special children will benefit not only their children but all the people in the community. They will learn to accept individual differences.

In order to nurture a kind of environment for special education, there should be strong collaboration with parents and the community. Hence, parents' participation is strongly encouraged. Teachers should have continuous communication with families through phones or mails. Parents can make statement on strengths as well as expectations. Conferences between teachers and parents are conducted once a year and it depends on the needs that may arise. The program allows parents to visit the school and classroom at any time (Cate, et.al., 2010).

One of the comprehensive inclusive programs as mandated by the Department of Education for children with special needs is parental involvement. Strong parents' involvement can help prepare the children's academic, moral and spiritual development. Parents are encouraged to collaborate and monitor their children's performance, volunteer in the schoolroom as teacher aide and provide support to other parents, (DepEd Order No. 72, series 2009).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study assessed the implementation of inclusive kindergarten education. Specifically, this answers the following queries:

- i. What is the level of implementation of Inclusive Kindergarten Program along the following indicators: school policies and administrative support, school environment, teacher skills, knowledge and attitudes, teacher development, students, academic content and assessment, special subject areas/curricular activities, and community?
- ii. What is the extent of attainment of the program's objectives/outcomes in terms of: Child Find, Assessment, Program Options, Curriculum Modification, and Parental Involvement?
- iii. What are the best practices and challenges experienced by the principals and teachers in the implementation of inclusive kindergarten program?

- iv. What enhancement program maybe proposed based on the findings of the study?

Region XI also known as Davao Region. It is strategically located in the Southeastern part of Mindanao, Philippines.

Content

This research work employed the descriptive evaluative design. It is used to clarify what a program is supposed to be focused on, how it is supposed to work, what the purpose of the program is and if the program theory or rational is solid which is specifically referred to a Clarificative Evaluation by John Owen (2006). The program which has been running for years in the Philippines is deemed ripe for Clarificative Evaluation. The qualitative type was also used to determine the challenges experienced as well as best practices observed in the implementation of an inclusive kindergarten program through a focus group discussion with the principals and teachers which allowed the researcher to make follow-up queries based on the answers of respondents.

The respondents of the study were the school administrators who have handled schools for two years or more and the permanent kindergarten teachers who have also been teaching for two years or more in the selected public and private schools. There is a total summary of 84 principals and 251 kindergarten teachers equivalent to 335 respondents involved in this study.

Sampling Design

Purposive sampling method was used to identify the involvement of respondents in the implementation of the inclusive kindergarten program. Upon retrieval, 58 schools from the public responded while 26 schools from the private schools responded. Some schools declined to answer the questionnaires for some ethical reasons. Summing all the respondent schools both public and private, 84 schools were included in the conduct of evaluation.

Research Environment

Research locale is in Davao of City which is part of Southern Philippines. Specifically, public elementary schools and private schools are the target of the study. Davao City is the capital of

Research Instruments

The researcher adopted the Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments of UNESCO (2015). Specifically, the survey questionnaire consists of the level of program evaluation of inclusive-kindergarten program in early childhood setting in terms of the following areas: “the school policies and administrative support, school environment, teacher skills, knowledge and attitudes, teacher development, students, academic content and assessment, special subject areas/extra-curricular activities, and community”.

Another tool was developed from the comprehensive inclusive program for children with special needs (DepEd Order no. 72 s. 2009) with the following components: “child find, assessment, program options, curriculum modifications, and parental involvement”.

The modified questionnaires of Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments of UNESCO (2015), tool from the comprehensive inclusive program for children with special needs (DepEd Order no. 72 s. 2009) and modified questionnaire for focus group discussion was submitted to the panel of experts for validation to ensure its validity and reliability through a pilot testing.

Pilot Testing : To confirm its reliability, the questionnaires were pilot tested to randomly selected 30 kindergarten teachers who were not part of the respondents/or study.

Results : Out of the eight indicators, six of them are observed to be very high, though academic content and assessment got the highest mean which is very high with a mean of 4.52 and standard deviation of .496 while teacher development got the lowest mean which is high with a mean of 4.08 and a standard deviation of .752.

Table 1-Level of School Implementation of Inclusive Kindergarten Program

Level of School in the Implementation of Inclusive Kindergarten Program	Overall Mean	Overall Standard Deviation	Overall Descriptive Equivalent
School Policies and Administrative Support	4.26	.559	Very High
School Environment	4.20	.593	High
Teachers’ Skills, Knowledge and Attitude	4.43	.524	Very High
Teacher Development	4.08	.752	High
Students	4.41	.534	Very High
Academic Content and Assessment	4.52	.496	Very High
Special Subject Areas/Extra-curricular Activities	4.42	.636	Very High

Community	4.23	.725	Very High
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Legend: “Very High- 4.21- 5:00; High- 3:41-4:20; Moderate- 2.61-3.40; Low- 1.81-2.60; Very low- 1:00-1:80 (Source: UNESCO’S TOOLKIT, 2015, <http://www.unesco.org/education/Inclusive>)

Results in table 1 indicate that, kindergarten schools in one of the school divisions of Southern Philippines generally observe a very high level of implementation in inclusive kindergarten program. Further, this shows that the school administrators, teachers, and parents strongly observing implementations of inclusive kindergarten program. The Department of Education also consistently advocates inclusive education as a basic service for all types of exceptional children. In the same manner, participants of the 1994 Special Needs Education session held in Salamanca, Spain reaffirmed every individual’s right to education as enshrined in the 1984 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Because of this reaffirmation a renewal of pledge was completed. These declarations propelled the Department of Education to adopt a policy of inclusive education in 1997, although the interest to

educate Filipino children with disabilities started more than a century ago in 1902 during the American Regime.

Special education program in the Philippines formally started in 1907. In 1957, the Special Education Division of the Department of Education and Culture was created and it propelled the development of Special Education all over the country. The elements of Special Education programs include creating laws, training teachers, gathering census of exceptionallyabled children and youth in schools and community, integration of children with learning needs in mainstream classes and restoration and rehabilitation of residential and special schools and provision of materials (Reynolds, 2007). Hence, schools implement the inclusive kindergarten program.

Table 2-Extent of Attainment of the Program’s Objectives/Outcomes in the Implementation of Inclusive Education

Extent of Attainment of the Program’s Objectives/Outcomes Overall Overall Overall
 In the Implementation of Inclusive Education Mean Standard Descriptive

			Deviation	Equivalent
Child find		3.47	1.030	High
Assessment		3.73	.939	High
Program Options		3.58	.916	High
Curriculum Modification		3.96	.783	High
Parental Involvement	3.98	.844		High

Legend: “Very High- 4.21- 5:00; High- 3:41-4:20; Low- 2.61-3.40; Very Low- 1.81-2.60; Not Achievable-1:00-1:80” Source: DO 72, s. 2009 from <http://deped.gov.ph/orders/do-72-s-2009>

Presented in table 2 is the extent of attainment of the program objectives/outcomes in the implementation of inclusive kindergarten program. The extent of attainment of the program objectives/outcomes consistently yielded a high level of implementation in all indicators. This means that approximately 61%-80% target indicators of the inclusive kindergarten program were accomplished in one of the Divisions of Southern Philippines. Out of the five indicators, parental involvement got the highest mean followed by curriculum modification, next is assessment, then program options and lastly is child find.

Results indicate that mostly, kindergarten schools observed a high level of attainment in the implementation of inclusive kindergarten program. Further, this shows that the school administrators, teachers, and parents strongly support inclusive

kindergarten program. This affirms with the Department of Education order that

“there is an urgency to address the participation rate of children with learning needs on inclusive education. All children as assured by the Department of Education, have the right to suitable education within the regular or inclusive setting regardless of their race, size, shape, color, ability or disability with support from school staff, students, parents and the community” (DepEd Order No. 72 s, 2009).

Best Practices and Challenges Experienced by Principals and Teachers

The best practices observed by the principal and teachers as far as inclusive education implementations are the dedication of the teachers, school facilities, and in-service training.

Dedication of Teachers: Teachers have the love, the goal for the child to create something meaningful.

They learned to be patient, understanding and optimistic.

School Facilities: There are constructions of facilities appropriate for both regular students and students with special needs like ramps, audio visual room and special rooms added with strong linkages with stakeholders.

In-Service Trainings: Teachers attended a capability building skills training. They also joined seminars like “sign language” for the Hearing Impaired, literacy and numeracy music and dance, strategies in teaching children with learning difficulties. Principals echoed to the teachers the trainings and seminar attended. On the other hand, there are challenges in the implementation of the program as experienced by the principals and teachers. The issues that came out of the Focus Group Discussion centered on attitude, teacher workload, acceptance of parents and other minor complains.

Curriculum Modification

Teachers do modifications of drills and school works during remedial classes. They provide anecdotal record of the child’s behavior during class, conducted parent-teacher conference and provide an Individual Education Plan. In addition, teachers take time for a one-on-one session with the child. They tried their best to simplify and modify the lessons for the children with special needs.

Support of Parents and other Stakeholders

Parents helped clean the classroom. They hired shadow teachers for their children. The mothers are asked to be the shadow teacher. Blessed with stakeholders, who shared what they have for the special pupils. Government and non-government agencies helped and supported the program”. Parents gave toys and some materials while the local governments donated sound systems and projector.

Attitude : Educators felt that child with special needs is an illness, the disabilities are sickness. They thought disabilities are contagious. Other teachers are stone-hearted and are close-minded about inclusive education. Teachers have limited knowledge about inclusive education. They complained having children with special needs in their classroom.

Workload : Teachers had to double their works because they have to follow-up the students in the regular class. A number of children with learning needs in the class are more than 2. Further, teachers have difficulty in handling different children with different needs at a single session especially if the child really needs a lot of attention.

Acceptance of Parents : Parents' cooperation is very hard. Parents provided all their children's need but it's really hard to reach out with them because they are hands-off”. Only the nanny will take care. At home, there is no follow-up of what they did in school.

There are best practices observed by the principals and teachers however, there are also challenges. Findings of the study on the level of school implementation of inclusive kindergarten program are generally observed to be very high and attainment of the program objectives/outcomes consistently yielded a high level of implementation. However, still there is a need to enrich the Inclusive Kindergarten Program. Hence, a proposed program is developed for the enhancement of Inclusive Kindergarten Program.

Proposal for the Enhancement of Inclusive Kindergarten Program

Based on the findings of this study, an intensive seminar-workshop on Inclusive Classroom for Kindergarten Teachers is designed.

Title of the Program: Strengthening Inclusive Classroom: Strategies that Work

Rationale

Kindergarten Education is now established as part of basic education and is required and obligatory for entrance to grade one. With this institutionalization, it was observed that there are children with special needs enrolled or mainstreamed/integrated in regular classrooms. Since children with special needs are in the regular classrooms, they became the additional load of the teachers. Teachers now claim that they need intensive trainings on how to handle with this kind of children. Hence, a proposed program is developed for the enhancement of Inclusive Kindergarten Program specifically on teacher development and child find.

Outcomes

- i. The following are the outcomes of a training program about inclusive classes for kindergarten teachers:
- ii. Thorough knowledge on inclusive education in the local, regional, national and international community, identify legal bases about inclusive education and categorize different exceptionalities;
- iii. Familiarize strategies and intervention programs for children with special educational needs in an inclusive classroom;
- iv. Techniques on Child Find; and
- v. Expose to Special Education schools/centers.

Action Plan

This has to be done on the middle of the School Year 2017-2018 and may be done every year for evaluation purposes.

Key Result Area

- i. Modifies teaching strategies in an inclusive classroom.
- ii. Assesses children having special educational needs in their classroom.
- iii. Design intervention programs for children with special educational needs and techniques in child find.
- iv. Specifically, progresses kindergarten teachers' performance during the regular work routine and in improvement in the day-to-day functioning of the children who are the recipients of instructional activities.

CONCLUSION

Findings show that the level of school implementation of inclusive kindergarten program in the division of Davao City is generally observed to be very high. Out of the eight indicators, six of them which are observed to be very high are on academic content and assessment which got the highest mean; followed by teacher skills, knowledge and support; next is special subject areas/extra-curricular activities; then, students; succeeding school policies and administrative support; and the last community. Only two indicators got high level of implementation namely school environment and teacher development.

Attainment of the program objectives/outcomes consistently yielded a high level of implementation in all indicators. This means that approximately 61%-80% target indicators of the inclusive kindergarten program were accomplished in Davao City Schools Division. Out of the five indicators, parental involvement got the highest mean followed by curriculum modification, next is assessment, then program options and the child find which got the lowest mean.

The best practices observed as far as inclusive education implementation is concerned in the Division of Davao City include dedication of teachers to teaching children with special needs, appropriate school environment, in-service trainings conducted to teachers handling Children with Special Needs and support of parents to inclusive education programs while challenges met include attitude of teachers towards inclusive education, workload of teachers, and acceptance of parents having children with special needs.

On the extent of attainment of the program's objectives/outcomes, the best practices observed by the principal and teachers are curriculum modification and the support of the parents while assessment and strategies in handling children with behavioral problems were the challenges being met.

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn: Inclusive kindergarten program in Davao City is generally implemented in terms of "school policies and administrative support,

teachers' skills knowledge and attitude, students, academic content and assessment, special subject areas/extra-curricular activities and community, school environment, and teacher development".

The extent of attainment of the program objectives/outcomes frequently yielded a high level of implementation in all indicators: "child find, assessment, program options, curriculum modification and parental involvement".

Though a number of challenges are being met by teachers and administrators, there have been best practices observed in the implementation of inclusive education and to the attainment of program as well.

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations are made: Compulsory survey, family mapping, campaigns, and networking for children with learning needs should be conducted not only by the SPED teachers but also by the regular teachers. Intensive trainings and seminars on SPED-related topics be designed for both regular and SPED kindergarten teachers, participate in trainings, seminars-workshops, and benchmark to schools that accommodate learners with special educational needs. Require both regular teachers and special education teachers to earn additional units and/or obtain degree program on special education in the graduate school. Intensify support to kindergarten teachers in terms of professional and financial needs to help them perform their best. National Education officials should further evaluate the curriculum of Teacher Education Institutions by adding special education subjects. Thorough pre-service trainings must be conducted in preparation for the kindergarten teachers' actual teaching. Further research be conducted as regards enhancement of Inclusive Kindergarten Program problem.

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