

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A POLICY FRAMEWORK TOWARDS ACADEMIC SUCCESS

¹Susan Vicente D. Villarente & ²Vania Mercy N. Durante

¹University of Southeastern Philippines, ²Department of Education

[*susanvicente.villarente@usep.edu.ph](mailto:susanvicente.villarente@usep.edu.ph)

ABSTRACT

Inclusive education, a cornerstone of modern educational philosophy, strives to create learning environments where all students can flourish academically and socially, regardless of their abilities or needs. However, despite its widespread recognition, implementing inclusive education programs poses substantial challenges for school administrators. Hence, this study evaluated school administrators' challenges in implementing inclusive education and described their experiences managing these programs. Employing a qualitative design with a case study method, the research aimed to co-construct meaning with participants to understand their perspectives as leaders of inclusive schools. The findings highlighted that leadership vision and commitment, collaborative decision-making, and professional growth are critical factors influencing the success of inclusive education initiatives. These elements together serve as core pillars, forming a policy framework for inclusive education programs within educational institutions and impacting their efficacy and sustainability. Leadership vision and commitment ensure that inclusive practices are prioritized and integrated into the school's culture. Collaborative decision-making fosters a shared responsibility among stakeholders, enhancing the implementation process and ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered. Professional growth opportunities enable educators to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to support all students effectively. The study describes a policy framework that promotes the essential roles of leadership vision, collaborative decision-making, and professional growth in supporting academic success in inclusive education environments. By focusing on evidence-based strategies, stakeholder engagement, and a commitment to quality, inclusive education can enhance academic achievements for all students.

Keywords: *inclusive education, school leadership, policy framework*

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive leadership is pivotal in enhancing education at various local and international levels. Successful leaders in schools and education systems actively engage with all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and students, fostering open dialogue and understanding. They collaborate with their teams to develop and implement a shared vision for transformation. Inclusive leaders are dedicated to equity and ensuring every child has access to high-quality educational opportunities. Historically, inclusive education has primarily focused on special education, supporting children with disabilities and integrating them into regular classrooms. However, in recent years, the definition of inclusive education has expanded to encompass a broader commitment to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities, and inequalities in access, participation, and learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2020).

Education and its subsequent policies and practices cannot be comprehended without recognizing their strong influence from an increasingly interconnected global economy (Apple, 2017). Consequently, any discussion on inclusive education must be situated within the global context in which it operates. Hoorens et al. (2013) projected global societal trends until 2030. Their report highlighted several challenges, the most concerning being the rapid increase in inequality. Inclusive education guarantees equal access and is pivotal in creating a more equitable future. However, this objective is often not achieved in educational institutions. Inclusive Education (IE) in Philippine basic education is primarily governed by Department of Education Order No. 72, issued in 2009. This outdated directive lacks a clear and well-defined process for integrating children with special needs (CSN) into the general education setting. While there's a move to implement high-quality inclusion in schools, the Special Education Act (Philippine Senate Bill 3002), which aims to establish inclusion practices in general education schools, is still under review in the Philippine Senate. The ongoing delay in passing this bill and the unresolved issues related to its implementation, such as the standards to be met, hinder progress. In Davao City, Zerrudo (2022) reported that early learners with special educational needs are being mainstreamed in regular kindergarten classes. Some are diagnosed with disabilities, while others are identified based on teachers' assessments.

Based on the points raised above, there is a need to explore other issues and challenges which are confronting school leadership in inclusive education. This study addressed a gap in the role of school administrators in fostering academic success through the lens of inclusive education. The findings of this study illuminate the requisite actions for school administrators to support educators within inclusive classroom environments. This research holds paramount significance as it addresses the formidable task encountered by school administrators in furnishing instructional leadership to educators within the context of inclusive classroom settings. Therefore, this research aimed to explore the school leadership's vision and commitment impact the contextualization of academic success in inclusive education, the extent does collaborative decision-making among educational administrators contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive education, the role does professional development for inclusive practices play in enhancing the school leadership's effectiveness in inclusive education, the policy framework can be developed based on the results of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An administrator's instructional leadership is crucial for the school's academic success. Davis and Boudreaux (2019) highlighted that principals who fostered a productive and satisfying work environment and enhanced student learning conditions achieved higher student achievement. Furthermore, administrators play a strategic role in improving the quality of school education. Bafadal et al. (2018) conducted a regression analysis and found that instructional leadership variables contributed 33.6% to the quality of teacher performance, while the remaining 63.4% came from other factors. Sebastian and Allensworth (2019) also revealed that administrators allocate approximately 27% of their time to administration, 21% to management, 15% to internal relationships, and 5% to external relationships. These responsibilities are essential for supporting the school's operations and the learning environment but are not directly related to student learning. Researchers have suggested that administrators may have a higher success rate in instructional leadership when their leadership responsibilities are distributed within the school (Bettini et al., 2019).

As school leaders, principals play a crucial role in influencing student achievement. For instance, Lavigne (2020) highlighted that the leadership role administrators assume within their schools is shaped by the school's culture and conditions. Through interviews with principals, Lavigne realized that the relationship between administrators and their staff is crucial for the effectiveness of instructional leadership. Instructional leadership, which is rooted in formal roles, often originates from interpersonal relationships, particularly between teacher leaders who provide essential support. Gordon et al. (2021) further explored this aspect by interviewing principals and teacher leaders, revealing that principals have increasingly relied on teachers assuming leadership roles. Additionally, Ezzani (2021) conducted interviews with principals and assistant principals and found that delegating some duties to teacher leaders resulted in increased teacher attendance, improved collaboration, and data-informed decision-making regarding instruction, leading to improved student test scores. However, despite their critical role in implementing inclusive education, many principals lack adequate training, with only 53% required to take relevant courses (Billingsley et al., 2018).

Based on the literature reviewed, several critical research gaps persist in instructional leadership. While the literature acknowledges the importance of administrators in fostering academic success and impacting student achievement through their leadership, it fails to adequately explore how principals can effectively manage their diverse responsibilities while prioritizing instructional leadership. Therefore, further research investigation is necessary to address the gaps in this area and contribute to inclusive education.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a case study approach. Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing various empirical materials (data) to describe the challenging moments in participants' lives. Qualitative methods are primarily used in research aimed at providing an in-depth description of a setting. This study focused on the process of developing, acquiring, and exhibiting an inclusive consciousness in order to run successful inclusive schools. The sources of data were ten (10) school heads in Davao City Division implementing inclusive education and identified through records from the district office. Creswell and Poth (2016) claimed that case studies often focus on a profound understanding of a

phenomenon rather than generalizability; hence, with ten (10) participants, researchers can gather detailed and adequate data through interviews, observations, or other methods that allow for thorough analysis. Further, Yin (2018) argued that ten (10) participants in a case study is enough sample size since it balances feasibility and the necessity for meaningful insights. The selection of ten (10) school heads was done through purposive sampling. The researchers employed an interview protocol as a tool for gathering specific information aligned with the study's objectives and as a means of engaging in a conversation about a particular topic (such as someone's life or specific ideas and experiences). They refer to this harmonious balance between inquiry and conversation as an inquiry-based conversation, which serves as a guiding framework to propel the inquiry forward, requiring careful attention and effort (Patton, 2015). This study used a researcher-designed questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. The primary data collection method employed in this research was semi-structured interviews. This method was selected because it has the inherent ability to reveal information that cannot be directly observed. The collected data was analyzed using the 6-step strategy for qualitative data analysis outlined by Creswell (2017). Ethical considerations were paramount in ensuring the integrity and fairness of this study. Participants were approached with utmost respect for their autonomy and rights.

RESULTS AND FINDING

Throughout the focus group discussion (FGD), the school heads accentuated various significant statements that impact academic success in inclusive education. The results revealed that there are three (3) emergent themes. This inquiry is centered on investigating the intricate interplay between School Leadership's Vision and Commitment and their impact on contextualizing academic success in inclusive education. These themes are *visionary planning synergy*, *empowered inclusive environment*, and *fostering inclusive pedagogy*.

The extent of collaborative decision making among educational administrators is crucial for achieving the goals of successful implementation of inclusive education. In this context, collaboration involves engaging stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and community members in decision-making. Effective communication channels are essential to ensure all voices are heard, perspectives are considered, and decisions are made collectively to support the inclusive education agenda. Based on the results of the study, there are three emergent themes and notable statements that have surfaced. These three key themes are *explicit goals and objectives*, *strategic stakeholder partnership*, and *clear communication channel*.

Professional development for inclusive practices is pivotal in enhancing school leadership effectiveness in inclusive education by equipping leaders with the necessary knowledge, skills, and strategies to create and sustain inclusive learning environments. This ongoing education ensures that school leaders are up-to-date with best practices, legislative requirements, and innovative approaches to inclusion, enabling them to address all students' diverse needs effectively. The three themes emerged from this analysis are *enhanced inclusion leadership*, *inclusive training*, and *universal learning platforms*.

This study found out that a policy framework for enhancing academic success through school leadership in inclusive education is necessary. This framework offers a structured approach aimed at fostering academic success within inclusive education contexts. It encompasses key components including *leadership vision and commitment*, *collaborative decision-making*, *professional development*, *challenges*, *monitoring*, and *evaluation*. By

delineating these essential elements, the framework provides a comprehensive strategy for promoting academic achievement and equity for all learners in inclusive educational settings.

DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The first theme, "Visionary Planning Synergy," entails the systematic and productive strategic planning process and collaborative meetings among educational leaders. The objective is to comprehend, articulate, and embody the school's vision. School leaders underscored their commitment to achieving inclusive academic success through establishing clear goals, implementing inclusive practices, and cultivating a supportive learning environment for all students. This strategic foresight enhances innovation, adaptability, and sustainable growth by aligning stakeholders with a clear, long-term vision. It improves resource allocation, risk management, and stakeholder engagement, ensuring the organization remains resilient and competitive in a rapidly changing environment. Ultimately, visionary planning equips organizations with the tools and mindset to navigate complexities and capitalize on emerging opportunities effectively. Schools should always be prepared to collaborate with community stakeholders to address any deficiencies in their physical facilities and resources, as emphasized by Cranston (2001). It is widely recognized that schools cannot function independently within the community, and for schools to progress and achieve their goals, community partnerships should be strengthened (Allawan, 2012).

The second theme, "Empowered Inclusive Environment," encapsulates the notion of bolstering students' learning efficacy through leadership initiatives to foster inclusivity and support. Central to achieving inclusive academic excellence is the concerted effort towards providing equitable opportunities, implementing pedagogical approaches conducive to diverse learning needs, equipping educators with comprehensive training, vigilantly monitoring student performance, and cultivating an environment where all individuals feel embraced and respected within the educational milieu. The school leaders advocate passionately for an empowered inclusive educational environment where all students, regardless of disabilities, are granted access to quality education and equal opportunities. Couzens et al. (2015) highlighted the expectation that students with disabilities should perform academically at the same level as their non-disabled peers. Therefore, institutions must identify and support these students. Effective communication and collaboration among faculty, staff, and students play a crucial role in student success (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011). Additionally, Jairam and Kahl (2012) highlighted that utilizing support systems increases the likelihood of academic success for students with disabilities. Therefore, the literature underscores the importance of supporting students with disabilities in achieving academic success through effective communication, collaboration, and providing necessary accommodations and support systems.

The third theme, "Fostering Inclusive Pedagogy," focuses on providing learning opportunities, training sessions, workshops, seminars, and other forms of professional development designed to improve educators' knowledge, skills, and practices in inclusive teaching. This theme underscores the importance of continuous professional growth to equip teachers with the necessary tools to support diverse learners effectively. According to Hutchings et al. (2009), training and development must be meticulously designed and delivered to cater to the diverse needs of all employees. By doing so, organizations can ensure that their workforce is productive and satisfied. Training and development significantly enhance employees' ability to work more effectively. They improve interpersonal and technical skills, promote teamwork, boost

job confidence, and increase work motivation. As Rama Devi and Shaik (2012) rightly pointed out, organizations invest significantly in training and development to enhance their workforce's productivity. Knowledge, skills, and abilities play a pivotal role in determining employees' performance, and organizations must make wise investments in these areas to improve their productivity. Noe et al. (2006) further underscored the substantial financial and time commitment organizations make in training to support employees' acquisition of job-related competencies. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that the outcomes of training efforts are fully realized and impactful. Dowling & Welch (2005) emphasized the importance of providing tangible results from training investments to maximize their effectiveness.

The fourth theme, "Explicit Goals and Objectives," is a cornerstone in establishing an environment where everyone experiences a sense of respect, value, and inclusion regardless of their background, identity, or abilities. Inclusivity, built upon pillars like equity, diversity, accessibility, respect, and acceptance, forms the bedrock of this endeavor. By outlining clear goals and objectives, educational institutions foster an environment that embraces diversity and empowers every community member to thrive. A study by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) explored the role of inclusive education goals and objectives in fostering positive attitudes toward diversity and promoting social inclusion among students with and without disabilities. Their findings underscored the importance of setting inclusive goals, prioritizing collaboration, peer support, and mutual respect within the classroom. Furthermore, studies such as that by Loreman et al. (2005) have examined the impact of inclusive education goals and objectives on teacher practices and attitudes. The researchers found that clear and achievable goals helped to guide teachers' instructional strategies, differentiation practices, and classroom management approaches, leading to more inclusive learning environments.

The fifth theme, "Strategic Stakeholder Partnership," underscores the importance of fostering collaborative relationships and cooperation among diverse stakeholders to sustain and advance inclusive education initiatives. This involves actively engaging administrators, teachers, and the broader community in a collective effort to promote inclusivity within the educational framework. By fostering strategic partnerships, schools can tap into a wealth of resources, expertise, and perspectives, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of inclusive education practices. Slee (2011) examined the importance of partnership approaches in inclusive education. It highlighted the benefits of collaborative practices in addressing the diverse needs of students with disabilities. The research emphasized the role of partnerships in facilitating communication, sharing resources, and promoting a collective responsibility for inclusive education within school communities. Similarly, a study by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) explored the impact of strategic stakeholder partnerships on implementing inclusive education policies and practices. The study found that effective partnerships between schools, local authorities, and other agencies were associated with improved access to support services, enhanced professional development opportunities for educators, and greater parental involvement in decision-making processes.

The sixth theme, "Clear Communication Channel," refers to the consistent practice of facilitating transparent and accessible communication among all stakeholders involved in the educational process, focusing on supporting students' diverse needs. This theme emphasizes the importance of ensuring that all parties are well-informed and can contribute to decision-making. Achieving this requires promoting collaboration through group discussions, fostering openness and trust, and holding regular meetings and consultations. Ruijs et al. (2010) delved into the influence of clear communication between teachers and parents on the educational outcomes of students with special educational needs. Their findings revealed that open and transparent

communication fostered increased parental involvement in their child's education, leading to improved academic progress and social development.

The seventh theme, "Enhanced Inclusion Leadership," refers to the increased knowledge, skills, and abilities that educators and administrators develop to support and facilitate inclusive practices within the school environment effectively. This theme highlights the importance of continuous professional development and training, which equip school leaders and teachers with the competencies needed to address the diverse needs of all learners. Educators are better prepared to create supportive and equitable learning environments by enhancing their understanding and application of inclusive education strategies. Slee (2011) explored the impact of enhanced inclusion leadership on policy implementation and systemic change within educational systems. The study highlighted the importance of strong, visionary leadership in driving inclusive education reforms, mobilizing resources, and overcoming resistance to change. Moreover, studies like that by Avramidis and Kalyva (2007) have examined the relationship between enhanced inclusion leadership and student outcomes in inclusive classrooms. The research found that effective leadership practices were associated with improved academic achievement and social-emotional development for all students, such as promoting collaboration among staff, providing targeted support for students with diverse needs, and fostering a culture of acceptance and belonging.

The eighth theme, "Inclusive Training Programs," refers to delivering specialized support, guidance, and professional development opportunities to educators, administrators, and other stakeholders involved in implementing inclusive education practices. This training is often facilitated by a School Leadership and Assistance Committee (SLAC), which ensures that all participants have access to the necessary resources and knowledge to effectively support inclusive education. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Moraña and Carballo (2017) on faculty programs in inclusive education and disability. Participants in the university environment training program for social and educational inclusion reported feeling more informed, better trained, and more aware. The evaluation of their experience provides evidence that training in disability and inclusive education can positively influence teaching practices. Srivastava et al. (2015) further supported this notion by highlighting the practicality of inclusive education training based on their study. In conclusion, promoting teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education has significantly increased their understanding and adoption of inclusive practices.

The ninth theme, "Universal Learning Platforms," refers to mediums or channels that provide easy and inclusive access to information, resources, and updates regarding the latest developments, best practices, and emerging trends in inclusive education. These platforms ensure that school leaders and educators have access to diverse resources, training opportunities, and collaborative platforms. This access is essential for continuously enhancing their professional skills and staying updated with current research and educational policies. Ianes and Venturoso (2021) asserted that transitioning towards an inclusive digital education integrated with traditional classroom learning is increasingly imperative. Consequently, it is crucial to provide practical guidance to all educational operators to prevent the creation of new disparities among students, particularly those with special educational needs (SEND). Moreover, we believe that incorporating accessibility and disability into the curriculum presents a valuable educational opportunity to explore the capabilities and limitations of technology. The entire class can benefit from these advancements by adopting digital materials or presenting content differently. Panggabean et al. (2024) conclusively demonstrated in their study that online learning platforms can significantly enhance the educational outcomes and satisfaction of students with disabilities

when equipped with comprehensive accessibility features and aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles.

Addressing the diverse needs of learners in educational settings is paramount for fostering inclusive environments. However, the journey towards inclusive education is not without its hurdles. Challenges in inclusive education explores the multifaceted obstacles encountered in implementing inclusive educational practices, highlighting the complexities and nuances of creating genuinely inclusive learning environments. School leaders encounter numerous challenges when implementing inclusive education programs, including managing limited resources, addressing resistance from staff or parents, and ensuring that the needs of diverse learners are effectively met. However, amidst these challenges, school leaders remain hopeful for a better future where inclusive education becomes the norm rather than the exception. They envision a future where every student has equal access to quality education and support services regardless of their background or abilities. With dedication, collaboration, and ongoing professional development, school leaders strive to create inclusive learning environments where everyone is valued, respected, and allowed to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Monitoring and evaluation are crucial components of inclusive education, providing insights into policies, practices, and interventions that foster holistic learner development. Monitoring tracks progress and outcomes, including academic attainment, social integration, and emotional well-being, equipping educators and policymakers with actionable intelligence for evidence-based decision-making. Evaluation appraises the effectiveness of specific strategies, programs, or interventions, identifying success patterns and potential barriers. Rigorous evaluation informs strategic refinement and provides empirical evidence for advocacy and policy deliberations. Systematic integration of monitoring and evaluation fosters accountability, continuous enhancement, and inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Conclusions

This study sought to develop a policy framework outlining the role of school leadership in inclusive education, specifically in fostering academic success within Davao City. The study's findings emphasize the crucial impact of leadership vision and commitment, collaborative decision-making, and professional development on inclusive practices. These factors collectively form the foundation for the effectiveness and sustainability of inclusive education initiatives within educational institutions. Leadership's clear vision and unwavering commitment to inclusivity set the tone and direction for creating an inclusive learning environment where every student can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Collaborative decision-making involving diverse stakeholders fosters a sense of ownership, collective responsibility, and shared goals, leading to informed decisions that prioritize inclusivity and equity.

Recommendations

The findings of this study hold great potential for improving continuous professional development initiatives for educators. These results ensure educators have the knowledge, skills, and strategies to implement inclusive practices effectively. By addressing the diverse needs of students and promoting a culture of inclusivity, educators can play a crucial role in fostering academic success for all learners in inclusive educational settings. This emphasizes the importance of ongoing professional development efforts in empowering educators to create supportive and inclusive learning environments that cater to students' diverse learning styles, abilities, and backgrounds. Ultimately, this leads to improved educational outcomes and increased inclusivity in education.

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