GENERAL EDUCATION AND SPECIAL EDUCATION: HARMONIZATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION TOWARDS K-12 SYSTEM IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

In April 2014, a four-day workshop entitled Inclusive Education Harmonization Project was conducted among DepEd officials and representatives from different regions to collect information on IE conceptualization and practices in the Philippines. This sought to evaluate the existing policies and service delivery modalities to arrive at strategic actions towards strengthening and implementing IE in the country. Responsive to the transition of Philippine Basic Education to K-12 system, the study aligned its evaluation on the K-12 provisions on *inclusiveness*. Data gathered were analyzed to identify policies and practices supportive of IE and come up with recommendations for IE implementation. The desire for IE is expressed implicitly in the IRR of K-12. Its provision for *inclusiveness* is evident in Section 8 which states that the learners' cultural background and special needs should be taken into consideration. Meanwhile, Article 12 of the Policies and Guidelines in SPED in the Philippines in 1998 echoed a clear recommendation of passing legislative measures on IE. DepEd initiated a more concrete action for IE by releasing DepEd Memo No. 373, s. 2009, which details a comprehensive inclusive program for children with special needs. Results established that Special Education and General or Basic Education as a field has earned autonomy over the years. The action of GenEd and SPED to the call for IE seemed uneven in terms of time and extent. Furthermore, some policies in GenEd and SPED were found to pose a challenge towards IE. Similarities and differences of these two fields in terms of eight domains, namely, learners, governance, curriculum, instruction, teacher or professional development, assessment, environment, and sustainability, were established to identify and overcome challenges and issues at hand. Autonomy enabling factors such as historical data, legal mandates and funding streams were reviewed to come up with a unifying plan of action towards IE in the Philippines as response to IE global movement.

Keywords: General Education, Special Education, Inclusive Education, K-12 system

Introduction

The essence of Inclusive Education in the Philippines seems to have sprung in the context of Special Education. This is evident in the existence of the first school for the blind in 1907, and programs for the gifted in the 1960's, way before Education Act of 1982 was put in place. Several SPED programs have also stood as the first fruits of this initiative, as various laws and policies have been enacted to protect persons with disabilities, such as BP 344 Accessibility Law in 1983, and the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities in 1992. Internationally, the United States have been making waves through Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), then known as Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) from 1970-1990. These policies greatly put value on the dignity of the human person beyond their handicapping situations, and stem from the recognition of the right of every individual to education.

To develop IE models in the Philippines, the Research and Development Foundation of the UP College of Education (RDFCEI) completed studies concerning children Muslim and Indigenous children with disabilities, as well as the readiness of selected public schools to accommodate them. After the course of the study, it was deemed necessary to unify the understanding of IE due to existence of differing perspectives. Thus, the IE Harmonization Project, a 4-day workshop involving division heads from various regions, was initiated.

In about the same time, the Philippine educational system has undergone revamp through the implementation of K-12 Basic Education System. Otherwise known as Enhanced Basic Education Act (EBEA), it extends Basic Education to 12 years in lieu of the 10-year program, and promotes entry of preschool aged children to the kindergarten program (SEAMEO-INNOTECH, 2012). It is interesting to note that this law has explicitly manifested the *inclusiveness in education*. Sec 8 of R.A.10533 (2013) stipulated that "the inclusiveness of Enhanced Basic Education (EBEA) shall mean the implementation of programs designed to address the physical, intellectual, psychosocial, and cultural needs of learners, which shall include, but not be limited to 1) programs for the gifted and the talented; 2) programs for learners with disabilities; 3) Madrasah programs; 4) Indigenous peoples education program; and 5) programs for learners under difficult circumstances.

The Philippine education sector's initiatives for IE reforms under K-12 system becomes a huge challenge to the whole nation. A major paradigm shift and long-term commitment of all stakeholders should take place in lieu of the long-standing 10-year basic educational system where learners are explicitly grouped into different categories. The pressure to enforce such radical change is imminent with the initiatives for IE already occurring in different parts of the world. The country used to embrace international definitions and ideas on IE until the recent years when the grassroot personnel felt the need to generate IE definition in Philippine perspective.

Objectives

This paper will review existing programs and policies and identify features congruent to IE in the aspect of learners, governance, curriculum, instruction, professional development, and sustainability. The document review aims to identify features that may be convergent or divergent with IE. As an offshoot of the Harmonization Project, it aims to answer the following:

1) Review policies, programs, or projects in Gen Ed and SPED convergent with IE.
2) Review policies, programs, or projects in Gen Ed and SPED divergent with IE.
3) Provide recommendations that will improve or promote IE where needed.

Significance of the Study

The Philippines is committed to achieving EFA goals through long term solutions. With a wider perspective, the K-12 is seen as a catalyst for this change, putting its main thrust on the development of self-sufficient individuals who can contribute to the betterment of the society, towards social and economic progress (SEAMEO-INNOTECH, 2012). Nevertheless, down the line implementation is equally crucial, especially with regard to Inclusive Education (IE) in Special Education. For after all, the main goal of education, regardless of abilities and other qualities, is to equip the individual with skills towards self-sufficiency and independence.

This study aims to review the existing policies, practices, and programs in SPED and the provisions set by EBEA. It will try to pinpoint entry and exit points that will enable a Learner with Special Needs to be *included* in the general education setting. It also aims to identify convergent and divergent concepts and practices in IE and provide recommendations based on yielded results.

Conceptual Framework

UNESCO defined Inclusive Education as *a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners and can thus be understood as a key strategy to achieve EFA,* further recognizing that inclusive schools *are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the costeffectiveness of the entire education system* (The UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education, 2009).

The Philippine Education Act of 1982 (BP 232) and the Philippine Constitution of 1987 echo the same value of IE by stipulating the promotion of an individual's right to access education "regardless of sex, age, creed, socio-economic status, physical and mental conditions, racial or ethnic origin, political, or other affiliation (BP 232, Sec 3)." It furthered that the state shall therefore promote and maintain equality of access to education as well as the enjoyment of benefits of education by all its citizens." These two uphold the natural right of every individual to quality education.

Methodology

Document/ desk review of national policies, orders, and memoranda, as well as the results of the workshop proceedings was done to inquire existing policies and programs pertinent to the following areas: 1) Learners, 2) Governance, 3) Curriculum, 4) Instruction, 5) Professional development, and 6) Sustainability. The document review aims to identify features that may be convergent or divergent with IE.

Discussion of findings

Age as eligibility in general education

The Enhanced Basic Education Act (EBEA) defines learners as a pupil or a student, or a learner in the alternative learning system. Admission to Basic Education is based on a minimum age requirement, such that a learner aged 5 is expected to be in the Kindergarten level, a learner aged 6 is expected to be in the Elementary level, and those aged 12 and 16 are in junior and senior high school respectively.

Categories of learners In SPED program, DO 2, s. 2014 specifies categories such as learners with visual impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, learning disability, speech/ language impairment, serious emotional disturbance, autism, orthopedic requirement, special health problems, and multiple disabilities. Gifted learners, however, are mentioned in other DepEd policies. These learners possess distinct needs requiring the utilization of different materials, equipment, curricular modifications, services and teaching strategies. SPED promotes educational access to these learners whose needs are not typically accommodated in GenEd.

Workshop participants display how in the Philippines, the SPED program has gained institutional foothold over time in terms of *'labelling'* learners. For instance, they completely identified the different types of learners with special needs (LSNs) and proposed to use the phrase "learners with different giftedness" instead of "learners with different disabilities" or "differently gifted learners." This has to do with positive connotation of the former as the word disabilities may be equated with futility and hopelessness (Workshop 5, Question 1).

Governance

National governance

Governance includes the structures, policy formulations and management processes ensuring all the actors' accountability, commitment, empowerment, and participation. A political will and stable leadership ensures willingness to institutionalize reforms in existing current educational system. All private and public elementary and secondary institutions as well as alternative learning systems are mainly regulated and managed by the Department of Education through formulation, implementation and coordination of policies, plans, and projects for achieving the goals of national development.

Decentralization towards community-based school management

DepEd recognizes the crucial role of the community in setting the direction of the school, that it initiated the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA) in 2007. This paved

the way for Schools First Initiative (SFI), putting prime on the decentralization in the management of instructional and educational goals so as to empower communities and stakeholders in innovating ways to improve their local educational system. Through this initiative, School-Based Management (SBM) was revived through the sharing of strategies and experiences (DM no. 466, 2010). Local Government Units (LGUs) also showed its support for shared governance and decentralization initiatives through the presence of Local School Boards (LSBs) (RA 7160).

The SPED program also operates in accordance with the principles and policies of decentralization. In the current educational system, education of learners with special needs (LSN) and the gifted is within the jurisdiction of SPED Division, which is under the Bureau of Elementary Education in DepEd. It sets the policies and guidelines not only for public schools but also for private schools. Section 7 of the Policies and Guidelines in SPED in the Philippines (1998) states the end goal of SPED, which is to include all learners with special needs in the school system and finally in the community.

Learner-centered governance
In the general education setting, several initiatives have been done to ensure that service will be *learner*-centered, appropriate, and is supported by data. The implementation of EBEIS and Learner Information System (DO 23, s. 2014; DO 30, s. 2013; DO 33, s. 2013;) aims to have a central information system that will serve as learner information database, which will collectively become a basis of information pertaining to planning, programming, and budget allocation. Furthermore, several DepEd policies embrace the role of learners as partners in initiating school reforms such as inclusive education, which "evolved the alternative concept of a school, in which we managed learning without alienating diversity of learning practices and emphasizing the centrality of the learners in the total school operation" (DO 83, s. 2012).

Under the SpEd program, eleven years after the issuance of Policies and Guidelines in SPED in the Philippines (1998), the DepEd made a more concrete action for IE by releasing DepEd Memo No. 373, s. 2009, which details a comprehensive inclusive program for children with special needs. The said program covers essential components such as child find, assessment, program options, curriculum modifications, and parental involvement, which should be covered by the School Improvement Plan (SIP).

In connection with the child find mandate, the a policy on early registration of learners with disabilities in all public elementary and secondary schools, DO 2, s. 2014, provides evidence of divergence between policies at both national and international levels. Only 5 to 8 year-old children are covered on the early registration day. This may exclude learners with disabilities who are older but have not been included in previous census.

The workshop conversely, reveals that decentralization may unexpectedly result in exclusivity, autonomy, and abuse of power. To counter this negative effect, one of the participants highlighted the need for higher authorities to monitor and evaluate the overall school structures and operations.

Curriculum

Contextualization means curriculum individualization

K-12 has provisions in theory regarding instruction for children with special needs. In Sec 10.2. Standards and Principles, it adheres to learner-centered, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate curriculum as first among the list. Participants in the workshop concurred that the EBEA has features that promote IE, such that it is a nonthreatening curriculum as the learner's level of performance is highly regarded and contextualized in a manner understandable to them.

While the SPED curriculum shall be in accordance with the curriculum for regular education, it can be modified to maximize student potentials (DepEd, 2008b). Provision of special subjects, such as speech and sign language, auditory training and rhythm, and Braille reading and writing, music and typing; the use of English and Filipino as the medium of instruction; the simplification of course contents and extension of time usually allotted for subject areas can be carried out. It is suggested to provide a curriculum for cultivation of moral, civic, and spiritual values and livelihood especially for learners with behavioral concerns. Correspondingly, learners with physical impairments should be exposed to functional exercises while those learners with disabilities should be directed to tasks involving self-care, socialization, and pre-vocational and vocational skill training.

There is however, an inevitable apprehension towards EBEA. With the transition to K to 12 educational system, there is an increased pressure to align the SPED curriculum with the standard curriculum in GenEd. Hence, the extent of modification, to the point of creating a new curriculum or plan altogether should be flexible enough to warrant positive results, keeping into consideration the Individualized Educational Plan that some LSN may still be entitled to in the general education system. Moreover, provision of auxiliary services to LSNs should remain intact.

Instruction

Flexible instructional strategies towards effective teaching

Both curriculum and instruction are customized to address the unique needs of LSNs. Various teaching strategies, which are also used in GenEd instruction, could be utilized to increase students' outcomes. Teachers can use cooperative or team teaching while other professionals, parents, volunteers and even the peers or buddies can offer additional support in the teaching-learning process (DepEd, 2008b, DO 72, s. 2009). Short and simple language such as English is used to deliver instruction in SPED classes.

SPED demonstrates greater flexibility than GenEd in accommodating the needs of learners. This could be attributed to the direct instruction nature of its teaching method. As specified in DO 53, s. 2008 and the Policies and Guidelines for Special Education, the following instructional programs can be implemented: 1) Self-contained/Special Class Plan, 2) Itinerant Teaching, 3) Resource Room, 4) Cooperative Class Plan, 5) Distance Education Program for Children with Special, 6) Itinerant Teacher Plan, 7) Hospital

Instruction, 8) Homebound Instruction, 9) Special Education Center, 10) Special Day School, 11) Residential School and 12) Integration/ Mainstreaming.

In GenEd, provisions in EBEA encourage *remediation, reinforcement,* and *enrichment* programs for the *less able, the able,* and the *more able* children, which should be given after class. It is noteworthy that general provisions are stipulated in EBEA for LSNs, but has not mentioned the utilization of the instructional programs under DO 53, leaving an impression that the corresponding instructional programs are applicable only to SpEd centers, or may not be utilized at all by the general education system.

Divergence in definition of mainstreaming, integration, and inclusion
Workshop proceedings revealed that some DepEd key personnel fail to make distinctions among mainstreaming, integration, and inclusion. They believe that mainstreaming and integration are the same but the former involves pulling a child out of a SPED Center to attend a regular class and socialize with other students while the latter requires a SPED teacher to help a learner understands a lesson. Inclusion, on the other hand, is described by a participant as "the total insertion [sic] of a SPED student into a regular class without the help of a SPED teacher." Likewise, the workshop participants assert that a segregated education system for those with severe disabilities should be practiced despite IE reforms (Workshop 4, Question 2; Workshop 8).

Assessment
Purposes of assessment
Assessment in general education serves three main purposes: 1) assessment for progress and evaluation, 2) assessment of achievement, and 3) assessment for placement. Of all the purposes of assessment, the latter is most applicable to LSN.

In SPED, family and medical history, academic background, academic performance, and assessment results are used to identify students' areas of strengths and weaknesses and corresponding services (DepEd, 2008b). However, while the demand for assessment tools in SPED is high, assessment services remain largely unavailable. The workshop participants recommended that a "diagnostic team" or a "specialized group of assessors" at different levels, namely, school, division, and regional levels, be formed (Workshop 5, Question 2 & 3). Moreover, a paucity of policies regarding assessment of LSNs was seemingly reflected in the desk review of local documents. Assessment of SPED programs should be explicitly described, too (DepEd Memo 26, s. 2014).

Grading LSNs
The challenge of assessment for classroom or instructional performance as far as LSNs are concerned is grading their output. The EBEA encourages assessment for total understanding through written output, performance tasks, and quarterly assessment. To assess LSNs for classroom progress, the curriculum may be either modified for the child to cope. The allocation for performance tasks must be maximized for LSNs according to their level of performance. However, there are children at-risk of special needs not yet

formally assessed. In such a scenario, the applicable solution is the remediation prescribed in EBEA. Yet, chances are the learning difficulty might recur if inappropriate measures are taken. Hence, a system of assessment and placement may be developed among schools to ensure that learners' needs are addressed accordingly.

Professional Development

Professional training towards implementation of principles of IE

Since the implementation of EBEA, DepEd has never ceased training teachers to cope with the K-12 system. It has gone as far as the Higher Education level to ensure that incoming teachers are well informed of the new trend in the educational system. Moreover, DepEd apparently shows its recognition of the role of teachers and other professionals especially in SPED programs through differential teacher qualifications and compensations, incentives and training programs.

DO 12, s. 2011 stresses the need for teacher's expertise in elementary education and special education and experience in handling a regular class to become a SPED teacher. However, other required skills for teaching LSNs, such as skill in sign language or Braille, were not included (UNESCO Salamanca Statement, 1994).

It is worthy to note that workshop participants seem to value teacher's character more than skills and knowledge. They believe that IE teachers should be "dedicated," "passionate," "committed," "passionate," "patient," "with heart" and "can transform lives." Similarly, they should be "self-directed," "trained teachers," "knowledgeable," "professional teachers with specialization on different disabilities," and "skillful." (Workshop 6, Question 3). One verbalized his disappointment as teachers usually exert "high efforts" for the "high learners" while "low efforts" for the "slow learners" (Workshop 3, Question 2).

Environment

Accessible and accommodating physical environments

There are two types of environment to accommodate the learners. These are the physical environment and the learning environment. The physical environment includes facilities and architectural modifications that will enable and mobilize the learner towards IE. Construction of classrooms and facilities conducive to learning are of utmost importance to GenEd.

In SPED, students can be accommodated in various environments such as hospitals, homes, rehabilitation centers, and community centers (DepEd, 2008b). The workshop participants, however, consider that SPED Centers is the first placement option for LSNs (Workshop 8, Question 1). Such viewpoint may have emanated from DO 72, s. 2009, which states that a single- or multi-grade self-contained class under a SPED teacher is the first program option for these learners. A maximum of two children with mild disabilities or one child with moderate/ severe disability can be placed in a regular classroom. Such

placement schemes, however, seemingly contradicts IE principles by putting limits in the enrolment of children with disabilities in regular schools.

In Region I and II, the SPED Centers are intentionally situated inside the regular schools with the rationale of helping learners with disabilities feel that they are not different (Workshop 1, Question 3). However, genuine collaboration between SPED and GenEd professionals seemingly does not exist.

Learner-friendly and safe environment Learning happens best in an environment of full of positivity and affirmation. To address current issues that threaten the learners' wellbeing, the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013 (RA 10627) was enacted. This is in response to Sec 8 in the IRR of K-12, the psychosocial needs of learners should be equally considered. The Anti-Bullying Law was passed as protection from external threats and negative effects of bullying. The school is enjoined to create a "positive school climate and environment conducive to the attainment of learning objectives, the development of healthy relationships, and the understanding of and respect for individual differences."

Sustainability
Partnership, collaboration, funding and M&E for a sustainable IE
Sustainable partnerships, collaboration and funding are based on long-term relationships being made with either private or public parties. DepEd engages in mutual partnerships of this kind, exemplified by Public-Private Partnership for building school infrastructures. Adopt-a-School Program is also another program that invited private firms to bid for improvement of public school facilities and other educational materials or services. In exchange, participating private firms receive tax incentives, on top of maintaining good corporate image in the society. These are but few of the varied programs launched by DepEd to sustain its programs and projects.

DO 39, s. 2013 stipulated budget allocation scheme for elementary and secondary schools. Each enrolled elementary student will receive P800 per school year while each secondary school is provided with a fixed and variable costs of P125, 000 and P50, 000, respectively. A minimum number of students per exceptionality is set to acquire the variable cost. However, it seems that such quota system does not support IE policies as not every student will be guaranteed to receive financial subsidies. Other issues in funding and allocating resources in SPED such as late issuance of Special Allotment Release Orders (SARO), a document used to facilitate fund release, has been brought up.

Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) is best done in the context of SBM. M&E as a mechanism of check and balance aims to determine the a school's performance and progress vis-à-vis their SIP and AIP. M&E channels the course of the school, based on the data derived from report forms, hence the importance of accurate, if not, truthful reporting. Yet, the challenge is on the involvement, sincerity, and commitment of school leaders in preparing the reports for M&E. For instance, preparation of SIP and other M&E tables are created only for compliance purposes, which may tend to make the task routine

and automatic (DO 83, s. 2012). This could lead to inaccurate data and erroneous decision-making process, consequently defeating the purpose of M&E.

Conclusion

In all the areas reviewed, it is apparent that policies and programs are well in place to warrant implementation of IE. Specifically, the following were found to be adherent to the principles of IE across the two programs;

1. The operational definition of IE postulated by the workshop participants is reflective of the values inherent in IE.
2. The explicit manifestation of inclusiveness in Basic Education creates awareness and advocacy in the executive level.
3. There is a consensus on the importance of shared governance and decentralization strategy in achieving goals in education.
4. Sustainability of IE reforms under K-12 system through partnerships, collaboration and appropriate funding mechanisms is highly recognized.

The following were found to be divergent points:

1. There is a need to tie the knot between the system of assessment and proper placement in SPED and GenEd. Authentic collaboration between teachers in SPED and GenEd should be established, too.
2. There is a need to establish the rationale of quota system for funding SPED services and projects
3. The purpose of SPED centers during IE implementation under the K-12 system should be delineated.
4. The different expectations of GenEd and SPED in student outcomes as well as grading and promotion of learners should be evaluated and reconciled.
5. Differential compensation for teachers in GenEd and SPED may hamper collaboration among them and may subsequently hamper IE implementation

Recommendations

Given the divergent and convergent points of GenEd and SPED, the following are the recommended actions per IE area:

Governance/ Management

a. Conduct regular SBM assemblies featuring current trends and successful SBM models in a regional or division level.
b. For policy interventions, evaluate DO 72 s. 2009 and DO 2 s. 2014 for their alignment with IE principles
c. Develop and strengthen policies on assessment including its funding and facilitation.
d. Develop a reliable database system indicating updated census of learners with disabilities, their placements and programs.
e. Develop a system of efficient allocation and delivery of funds to schools.

Curriculum

a. Develop various materials for SPED, which are aligned the K-12 curriculum.

b. Reevaluate the learning outcomes for students with and without disabilities in an inclusive classroom as GenEd and SPED show differences in student expectations, grading and promotion.

Assessment

a. Develop a non-expensive and readily available assessment tool in GenEd and SPED.

Environment

a. Develop inclusive schools by (1) upgrading schools for physical access by adding facilities (e.g. ramps, handrails) and infrastructures and removing architectural barriers in schools and (2) developing anti-bullying campaigns and measures

b. Develop inclusive classrooms by (1) revisiting the policy on the maximum allowed number of children with disabilities in a regular classroom and (2) upgrading classroom by adding adapted furniture.

Sustainability

a. Develop a directory of services for (1) child finding, (2) assessment and diagnosis, (3) assistive devices, (4) assistance with facilities, (5) funding, (6) medical and health services, (7) school improvement/ upgrading

b. Examine DO 39, 2013, which shows a quota system for calculating the variable cost to be given in a SPED school

c. Increase the participation of local and national government agencies to target domestic issues on parental negligence.

Professional Development

a. Conduct in-service trainings for special and general education personnel

b. Extend pre-service training through on-the-job-training, teacher apprenticeship, or working student programs for IE orientation and practice

c. Identify adjustments needed in teacher qualifications for IE implementation

d. Examine the current salary grading system for GenEd and SPED personnel and determine the adjustments to be done for IE implementation

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