

CONCEPTUALIZING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES: A CONSENSUS-BUILDING APPROACH

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Abstract

In 2013, the Research and Development Foundation of the College of Education (RDFCEI, March 2014) of the University of the Philippines conducted a study in 12 selected public schools in regions participating in the Philippines' Response to Indigenous and Muslim Education (PRIME) Programme. The study assessed the readiness of PRIME public schools to provide and sustain Inclusive Education (IE) services for Indigenous Peoples (IP) and Muslim children with disabilities. Findings revealed that educators have divergent views regarding IE, and recommended that the harmonization of existing definitions of inclusion is essential before the implementation of IE. This article explains the methodology implemented to conceptualize IE (RDFCEI, June 2014). Seventy-five (75) key officials of Special Education, Muslim Education, IP Education, and Alternative Learning System, and of the Central Office of the Department of Education participated in eight (8) focus group discussions regarding their views and experiences regarding exclusion, inclusion and IE. The resulting definitions of IE by each group were critiqued

and a working definition was formulated through consensus building during a plenary session. This working definition incorporates nine essential aspects, reflects internationally established principles of inclusion and promotes Education for All. It places diverse Filipino learners at the heart of education that underscores acceptance, equal opportunities and non-discriminatory practices; and acknowledges and cultivates cultural diversity and multiculturalism.

However, it is unique in recognizing and respecting one's *kapwa* (the unity of the one-of-us-and-the-other) (Enriquez, 1976, 1995) and spiritual beliefs, as well as including adult learners through learner-centered andragogy.

Keywords: Conceptualizing, Inclusive Education, Consensus-building

Background of the Study

In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 10533, or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, aims to transform Philippine basic education into one that is concerned with and responds appropriately to the wide range of needs, intellectual and cultural facility, circumstances and uniqueness of learners, schools and communities. Section 8 of its Implementing Rules and Regulations (2013) incorporates inclusive education as the implementation of at least five (5) programs that provides diverse learners access to basic education. The first of these programs is a wide scope of programs for gifted and talented learners in all levels of basic education. The second is an array of programs of home-, school-, center-, or community-based programs for learners with disability. Third is the Madrasah program for Muslim learners in private and public schools. Fourth is composed of various educational initiatives for Indigenous Peoples through formal, non-formal and informal modalities. Finally, different appropriate and responsive programs are designed for learners under difficult circumstances due to geographical inaccessibility, prolonged illness, dislocation (as a result of armed conflict, urban resettlement and calamity), child abuse, and child labor practices. These programs are provided in order to address the physical, intellectual, psychological, and cultural needs of all learners.

Efforts to address diverse learners date back to 1907 with the establishment of the Insular School for the Deaf and Blind in Manila. Subsequent programs addressed giftedness in the 1960s and the needs of out-of-school youth and adults in the 1970s. International instruments, especially the World Declaration on Education for All and Millennium Development Goals, provided the impetus for the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA), which expanded educational access, participation and achievement for Filipino learners through complete community support.

The World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain (UNESCO, 1994) called upon governments worldwide to prioritize policy and budget allocation for educational reform that would allow the participation of children with disability or learning difficulties in general education. The Salamanca Statement encouraged regular schools to adopt an inclusive perspective and place the learner at the heart of curricular planning and instruction with the intention of effectively address their educational needs. It suggested that schools oriented towards the inclusion of children with disabilities are better able to resist prejudice, create communities that embrace differences, and build societies that allow the physical, social and instructional integration of diverse individuals.

However, inclusion is understood in at least five different ways (Ainscow, Booth, Dyson, Farrel et al., 2006, cited in Ainscow & Cesar, 2006, p. 233-235): (1) “Inclusion as concerned with disability and ‘special educational needs;” (2) “Inclusion as a response to disciplinary exclusions;” (3) “Inclusion as about all groups vulnerable to exclusion;” (4) “Inclusion as the promotion of a school for all;” and (5) “Inclusion as Education for All.” These varied definitions can muddle the conceptualization of Inclusive Education (IE), preparation of environments conducive to the inclusion of diverse learners, formulation of IE-related policies, and implementation of inclusive practices in schools.

Recently, DepEd with support from Philippines’ Response to Indigenous and Muslim Education (PRIME) commissioned the Research and Development Foundation of the College of Education (RDFCEI) of the University of the Philippines to conduct studies that will form the bases for the development of models of Inclusive Education in the Philippines. In preparation for the development of these models, two studies were completed, namely, *Children with Disability among Indigenous and Muslim Communities* (RDFCEI, 2014a) and *An Assessment of Readiness of Selected Public Schools in PRIME Regions to Provide and Sustain Inclusive Education Services for IP/Muslim Children with Disabilities* (RDFCEI, 2014b). However, the plan to embark on developing models of IE was considered premature given the crucial finding that needed thorough scrutiny: education service providers hold conflicting views regarding inclusive education. Hence, the RDFCEI deemed it necessary to undertake an adjunct activity called IE Harmonization Project (henceforth, IEHP). Its objectives were the following:

- Review and discuss commonalities and convergence areas in IE-related policy documents, programs and projects in DepEd;

- Review and analyze K to 12-related policies, programs and projects on IE and identify convergence and or divergence areas in relation to above objective;

- Review ‘existing’ service delivery modalities of DepEd to Filipino learners and define operationally IE; and

- Harmonize the articulation of IE in the Philippine context based on objectives 1-3 and identify areas of the roadmap towards implementation of IE under the K to 12 system.

This paper focuses on the approach used in harmonizing conceptualizations of inclusive education, and expounds its emergent working definition.

Framework

Underlying the harmonization of conceptualizations of Inclusive Education is the basic assumption that the principles and practice of IE are embodied in the dialogues and experiences of actors involved in policymaking and implementation of educational services for diverse learners. These are also concretized in certain documents, such as laws and policies pertaining to basic education, that are released by the State in connection with local, national, regional, and global education imperatives over time. These dialogues and experiences of actors and the documents can substantiate and elucidate the characteristic articulations of such programs as General Education (GenEd), Special Education (SPED), Programs for the Gifted and Talented (PGT), Indigenous Peoples Education (IPed), Muslim Education Program (MEP), and Alternative Learning Systems

(ALS) taking place within the K to 12 system. In particular, the insights derived from the analysis of these articulations in specific contexts can bring to bear the points of convergence and divergence as to the principles and practices of IE, which can then set the grounds for developing practical recommendations towards the harmonization and strengthening of the aforementioned program.

This framework, thus, holds the view that IE derives its particular character both from concrete realities and from the State-led directions of inclusion in education in the Philippines.

Methodology

With this framework in mind, a four-day workshop was held in April 2014 in Tanza, Cavite, located southwest of Metro Manila. Of the eight focus group discussions conducted, four aimed at gathering data on participants' impressions regarding exclusion, inclusion and IE, and drafting their definition of IE. Plenary sessions were held for the purpose of disseminating information, critiquing and consensus building.

Participants. All regional offices (RO) of DepEd were contacted to seek advice on who could best represent their region with regard to Special Education (SPED), Muslim Education Program (MEP), Alternative Learning System (ALS) and Indigenous People Education (IPed). In cases where the identified representatives from the RO were not available, a replacement from the Division, District or school was sent. Despite invitations, however, Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was not represented because of prior commitments (See Table 1).

Table 1 – Workshop participants

Region / Office	Number of Participants	Gender		Program Represented					
		M	F	MEP	ALS	SPED	IPed	PGT	Not Specified
I	3	-	3	1	-	1	-	-	1
II	3	2	1	1	-	1	-	-	1
III	8	3	5	-	2	2	1	-	3
IVA	4	1	3	1	1	1	-	-	1
IVB	2	-	2	-	2	-	-	-	-
V	3	1	2	1	1	1	-	-	-
VI	3	-	3	-	-	-	1	-	2
VII	4	1	3	1	-	1	1	-	1
VIII	4	1	3	1	-	-	1	-	2
IX	4	2	2	1	-	1	1	-	1
X	4	1	3	2	-	1	1	-	-
XI	2	-	2	-	1	-	1	-	-
XII	3	3	-	-	1	1	-	-	1
CARAGA	3	-	3	-	1	1	1	-	-
CAR	4	1	3	1	-	1	1	-	1
NCR	3	3	-	-	1	1	-	-	1
Central Office	15	3	12	1	3	1	1	9	-
GRM-PRIME	3	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	3
TOTAL	75	24	51	11	13	14	10	9	18

Representatives from the Central Office (CO) and GRM-PRIME were also present. Participants from CO represented the Bureau of Elementary Education (BEE) and Bureau of Alternative Learning System (BALS), Indigenous Peoples' Education Office (IPSEO), Office of Madrasah Education (OME), Office of Planning Service (OPS), Research and Statistics Division (RSD), National Education Testing and Research Center (NETRC), Instructional Materials Council Secretariat (IMCS), National Educators' Academy of the Philippines (NEAP), and the Executive Committee. A total of 75 individuals participated in the workshops.

Bringing together 75 policymakers and implementers of educational services for diverse learners, and expecting them to harmonize their conceptualizations of Inclusive Education and formulate a definition of IE in the Philippine context is a demanding task. It is difficult considering that GenEd, SPED, PGT, ALS, MEP, and IPed have their own systems, processes, policies, pedagogy/andragogy, and learners; and collaboration among the education service providers of these programs is weak. The mediation of a neutral party (in this case, the researchers of UP College of Education and RDFCEI) is necessary to help them reach a mutually accepted articulation of IE that satisfies the interests of diverse learners.

Focus group discussions

The participants were divided into 8 groups, each facilitated by a university professor or graduate student. Participants representing CO and GRM-PRIME comprised the largest group and, thus, had to be divided into two. Documenters assisted the facilitators by prepared the FGD rooms and materials, as well as recording and transcribing discussions.

On the first workshop day, three (3) FGDs were conducted to elucidate three topics: exclusion, inclusion and Inclusive education (See Table 2). Each question was written on a sheet of Manila paper, and participants were encouraged to ponder on the focus question and write each of their answers on a metacard. Multiple answers were accepted according to each participant's experiences. The metacards were then taped onto the question sheet. Afterwards, similar answers were grouped together and each participant was requested to explain and clarify their answers. Facilitators made certain that every participant's thoughts and experiences, whether positive or negative, were expressed and clarified. Answers to each question were summarized before moving on to the next.

Table 2 – Topics and questions of the first three (3) workshops

Workshop	Topic	FGD Question
1	Exclusion	1. What are your thoughts about exclusion? 2. When does exclusion happen? 3. How does it happen? 4. What are the consequences of exclusion?
2	Inclusion	1. What are your thoughts about inclusion? 2. When does inclusion happen? 3. How does inclusion happen? 4. What are the consequences of inclusion?
3	Inclusive Education	1. What is inclusive education? 2. What are the manifestations of inclusive education? 3. What factors inhibit inclusive education? 4. What factors facilitate inclusive education?

Discussions on what these actors mean by exclusion, inclusion and Inclusive Education are essential because they reveal their perceptions, attitudes and experiences about them. These influence the policies they make, the programs they create and implement, and the degree of accessibility of these programs to diverse learners. They will also shape the degree to which K to 12 basic education will be inclusive to all. Meanwhile, discourse on the various causative factors in, manifestations of and effects of exclusion, inclusion and IE reveal cultures, policies and practices within the education system that need to be reformed, strengthened or abolished.

After the initial three workshops, the participants gathered in plenary during which IE-related international mandates were expounded. The Philippines' response to those mandates in making basic education more accessible to and respectful of diverse learners was also expanded. Discussions during these plenary sessions became the platform from which discussions during the fourth workshop continued.

The first four questions of the fourth workshop (See Table 3) meant to bring to fore and discuss alignments and contradictions in the participants' conceptualizations of IE in relation to existing conceptualizations fostered by international organizations, as well as to local contexts. Aspects of IE that they may not have considered were also noted.

Table 3 – Topics and questions of the first three (3) workshops

Workshop	Topic	FGD Question
4	Defining Inclusive Education in the Philippine Context	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In light of the previous presentations, what are your thoughts about the way the Philippines responded to the call for inclusive education (IE)? 2. What aspects of inclusive education in your previous presentations were not part of your original conceptualizations of IE? 3. What aspects on inclusive education are aligned with your original conceptualizations of IE? 4. What aspects of inclusive education contradict with your original understanding of IE? 5. How should Inclusion and Inclusive Education be defined in the Philippine context?

Each group then identified the critical aspects of IE relevant in the Philippine milieu. Synthesizing these aspects, a definition of IE was formulated by the group and written on a sheet of Manila paper (See Table 4).

Consensus building

Three plenary sessions were conducted in which the participants critiqued the definitions of IE formulated in the FGDs. Posted around the session hall, the eight definitions were compared and contrasted. The sessions were not without an amount of complaints and debate. Some participants thought that the work of the previous workshops was being repeated and, thus, redundant. It was explained that it was necessary to derive a definition of IE that incorporates the aspects significant across all eight definitions. Others argued from the standpoint of linguistic analysis, but it was explained that discourse analysis was more appropriate in formulating the working definition. Also, a participant from MEP

stressed the importance of spirituality for Muslims and its difference from culture and religion.

Discourse analysis identified common features of Inclusive Education. Features that were unique to some definitions were not disregarded, however, in recognition of the experiences of the groups and their members. In the end, nine core features of IE were identified. These are: (1) Process, (2) All types of learners, (3) Diverse needs, (4) Equal opportunities, (5) Meaningful life, (6) Non-discriminatory environment, (7) Belongingness, (8) Culturally sensitive, and (9) Learner centered.

Table 4 – Groups’ Workshop Definitions of IE in the Philippine Context

Group	Definition
Central Office 1	[IE is a] principle and collaborative practices of promoting quality education that is equally accessible to all learners through a contextualized curriculum.
Central Office 2	Inclusive Education is an education that provides access, quality, efficiency, effectiveness, and equal opportunity that addresses the needs of all types of learners regardless of age, sex, race, culture, religion, social status, and disabilities.
Regions 1 & 2	IE is a culture based Philippine education responsive to the needs of diversified [sic] learners.
Regions 3, 4B & 5	Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capability (KSA) of all types of learners in achieving quality education and becoming life-long learners, globally competitive, and useful members of the society.
Region 4A & NCR	Inclusive Education is a program that deals with educating diverse learners, ensuring their holistic development through the delivery of educational services suited to their needs.
Regions 6, 7 & 8	INCLUSIVE EDUCATION is the process of addressing and responding to the diversity of learners’ needs and providing equal access and educational opportunities in all levels of society.
Regions 9 & 10	Edukasyong Pangkalahatan - ay isang proseso kung saan ang iba’t-ibang klaseng mag-aaral na may kanya-kanyang pangangailangan ay nabibigyan ng pantay-pantay na pagkakataon tungo sa makabuluhang buhay sa isang ‘di mapanghusgang kinalulugaran na nagbibigay diin sa pagsasama-sama ng pagtuturo na nagaganap sa iba’t-ibang lugar ng pag-aaral na naaangkop sa kultura ng bawat mag-aaral [<i>Inclusive Education – is a process wherein different types of learners with their individual needs are being given equal opportunity towards a meaningful life in a nondiscriminatory environment that emphasizes unity in teaching occurring in settings of learning that are suitable to the culture of every learner.</i>]
Regions 11, 12 & 13	Inclusion is a process of engaging diverse individuals/communities by recognizing their participation, dreams, and aspirations, with respect to human dignity thus empowering them to expand their choices to live a decent, productive, and meaningful life.

Working Definition of Inclusive Education

The nine identified core features of IE were synthesized and then presented during plenary for consensus building. A major issue that arose was related to the 8th feature, *culturally*

sensitive. Participants from Muslim Education contended that not every Muslim culture and tribe have an Islamic perspective. However, since spirituality is a unifying factor among Muslims, it was suggested that the feature be revised into *culturally/spiritually sensitive*. The other participants accepted the suggestion.

Hence, the synthesized working definition of IE is as follows: ***Inclusive Education is a process where all types of learners with diverse needs are given equal opportunities for a meaningful life in non-discriminatory environments. These environments foster belongingness through a culturally/spiritually sensitive, learner-centered curriculum, learning processes, delivery modes and settings.***

An agreement was reached that inclusive education is a ***process*** because it is a particular series of actions, procedures, and strategies to achieve a desired goal. It involves a continuous, formal and informal assessment of each learner's prior knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies using appropriate assessment tools and collaboration of all inter-disciplinary stakeholders (internal and external). Outputs serve as inputs for the next stage until a result is achieved. However, there were also those who strongly dissented, and suggested that it should be called a system, program or approach. A system is considered a holistic approach towards the attainment of goals and achievement. In the end, the concept of IE as a process was retained.

The term ***all types of learners*** refer to each individual with different disabilities, giftedness and uniqueness, cultures, circumstances and other conditions. This includes learners who are young or old, out-of-school youth and out-of-school adults, with or without disabilities, rich or poor, IP or non-IP, regardless of religious affiliation and whether the learner is gifted, average, or behind. This also includes children in situations of armed conflict, people living with HIV and their families, and more. They are clearly different from the typical learner in terms of abilities/disabilities, placement, culture or religion, health conditions, and socioeconomic standing. It was stressed, however, that none of the abovementioned learners should be separated from the rest nor left behind.

Diverse needs arise from learner diversity. These refer include the various ways of meeting different needs and interests in learning, emotional attention, intervention, instruction, support, and trainings. It also includes unique needs that not all students may share such as cultural and religious/spiritual needs, safe and peaceful environments conducive to learning and more. One example of this is having a prayer room and water on hand for Muslim students. Facilities that are PWD-friendly are important. It is believed that schools and teachers must be responsive to these varied needs to allow learners to access education.

When learners are ***given equal opportunities***, there is a sense of equality and fairness in accessing quality education, health care and other basic services. Everyone is considered equally important and, thus, have the right to participate in learning experiences. To create an environment with truly no discrimination, it was suggested that there must be a shift in the mindset of various levels in the DepEd. Furthermore, it was raised that equal opportunities must be made available even when the learner is applying for a job. "No child left behind" was one of the concepts raised.

A **meaningful life** is one in which the person is self-actualized and given the power and ability to make his or her own decisions. It is a life with a purpose, used in service of others. A meaningful life is lived peacefully, harmoniously, productively, and prosperously, coupled with the 4 Ms (*Makatao* or Humane, *MakaDiyos* or God-fearing, *Makakalikasan* or Environment-friendly, and, *Makabansa* or Nationalistic). A meaningful life is associated with the terms *contentment*, *satisfaction*, *happiness* and *freedom*. It is the goal of IE to raise learners who are globally competitive and successful. Regardless of exceptionalities, they should attain their full potential and contribute to society.

It was agreed that the learner's environment should respect his or her culture and belief. **Non-discriminatory environments** are barrier-free, friendly, safe, secure, and healthy environments that are more conducive to learning. Culture and beliefs are respected and people are treated equally. These are learning places/spaces that welcome, accommodate and adapt to the various needs of learners.

Belongingness means being accepted, communicated to, and connected as a member of the group, team and local or global community. It is exemplified by the acceptance and respect of one's gender, religious and political beliefs, cultures, practices, and language. Learners are envisioned to be *kapuso* (of the same heart), *kabarkada* (of the same group), and *kapamilya* (of one family). This sense of involvement or oneness may transform the classroom's atmosphere into a more welcoming one.

Culturally/spiritually sensitive qualifies curriculum and instruction, delivery modes and settings of learning. To create a non-discriminatory education process that is conducive to learning for all, there is consensus that the school, its administrative head, the teachers, classmates, and facilities must be considerate and non-threatening to the students' varied cultures, religious beliefs and practices. The education system must be responsive and adaptive to learner diversity. This is seen as an extension of their basic human rights. Culture-based learning is necessary. Localizing the curriculum may help in recognition, protection, promotion, and preservation and enhancement of one's culture.

All strategies, curricula and pedagogies/andragogies are considered **learner-centered** when the needs of the students are at their core, and that programs, projects, approaches and activities are geared towards the holistic development of learners. This entails the provision of accommodations and modifications in curriculum and instruction, the environment and delivery modes to ensure that every learner is able to access education and attain academic success.

This working definition of Inclusive Education is reflective of internationally established principles of inclusion and promotes EFA. It places diverse Filipino learners at the heart of education that underscores acceptance, equal opportunities and nondiscriminatory practices; and acknowledges and cultivates cultural diversity and multiculturalism. It includes adult learners through learner-centered andragogies. However, it is uniquely Filipino in recognizing and respecting one's *kapwa* (the unity of the one-of-us-and-the-other) (Enriquez, 1976, 1995) and spiritual beliefs, and in fostering love for God, humanity, environment, and the nation.

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