

# EXPERIENCES OF BLIND STUDENTS IN INCLUSIVE TERTIARY CLASSES

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## **Abstract**

This paper deals with the experiences of blind students in inclusive tertiary classes. Following the qualitative method, this paper investigated the phenomenon of students of the School of Teacher Education in Saint Louis University, Baguio City, Philippines. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data from four (4) blind students. The data gathering was triangulated through interviews with the close friends of the blind students who are with them in their various classes. The interviews were conducted from forty (40) minutes to one (1) hour at the most convenient time and place of the key informants. The use of cool and warm analysis helped bring out the experiences of the research participants. Interestingly, two (2) main themes with three (3) sub-themes emerged from the study, namely: positive experiences - making me feel comfortable, making me feel motivated, and making me feel important; and negative experiences - making me feel discriminated, making me feel embarrassed, and making me feel worried.

**Keywords:** inclusion, negative experience, positive experience

## **Introduction**

Inclusion is a philosophy that promotes the educational right of every student. Inclusion is concerned with the provision of the appropriate support and services to the diverse needs of the students in the general education setting. This phenomenon of inclusion has influenced the increase in the number of students with disabilities enrolling in the different school levels including the tertiary schools in many countries. The Americans

with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States, the United Kingdom Disability Discrimination Act, and Canadian Human Rights Act support inclusion. Although these legislations do not directly refer to the education of students with disabilities in the tertiary level, these have been largely credited with the increasing access of students with disabilities to higher education. According to Olney, Kennedy, Brockelman, and Newsom (2004), the implementation of inclusion in the tertiary schools has increased the number of students with disabilities pursuing college degrees over the past twenty-five years.

Studies show that blind students are one of those often accommodated in universities. For example, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) in United States revealed that students with visual impairments have the third highest percentage (16 percent) of students pursuing postsecondary education. In a study conducted in Canada, the students with visual impairments had the second highest number of students with learning disabilities in small universities; however, in big universities, it is considered to be the third to have the largest population of students with disabilities (Hill, 1992). In the Philippines, the blind students represent one of the largest numbers of students with disabilities enrolled in the universities (Yap, Reyes, Albert, & Tabuga, 2009). Meanwhile, the increase in the enrolment of blind students in the tertiary schools suggests more exposure of the college instructors to this group of students.

Despite the earnest attempts to accommodate blind students in the tertiary level, few studies were conducted to understand how they may be served in order to cater to their academic and social needs. In the study conducted by Reed and Curtis (2012) in Canada, they found out that although the reported graduation rates of students with visual impairments in the higher education were high, the students took more than four years to complete their studies. Accordingly, the student-participants in the study of Reed et al. cited that one of the problems they encountered was lack of social and academic support in higher education. Corn and Koenig (1996) also pointed out that while blind students are may be accommodated in the regular classes; they continue to be disadvantaged socially and emotionally. Other researches also revealed that students with visual impairments feel lonely and they have fewer opportunities to socialize as compared to their sighted peers (Huurre & Aro, 2000; Kef, 2002).

Although studies were conducted showing some factors affecting the performance of students with visual impairments in the higher education like for example, difficulty in adjusting to university life, specific needs not addressed by teachers, teachers being content-oriented, lack of social relationships (Fatima, Bashir, Malik, Safder, Nayab, 2014; Bano, Akhter, & Anjum, 2013), these do not necessarily describe how these factors have affected the life of the students with visual impairments. The dearth in the number of literature on understanding the university experiences of blind students served as the basis for the conduct of this study. This concurs with the call of Hurst (1996) to look into the lived experience of disabled students since this has been missing from previous studies. Hence, this research sought to explore the experiences of the blind students in their professional courses while taking Bachelor of Secondary Education. Specifically, this study focused on the experiences of the blind students that have emotionally affected them. Studies show that students' emotions affect their academic performance and success.

This research adds to the body of knowledge about understanding the experiences of blind students in the Philippine universities. It is useful to school administrators and teachers in planning and preparing appropriate support and services to blind students. Furthermore, the findings of the study serve as a guide to all educational stakeholders on how to deal with blind students in an inclusive class.

### **Method**

This study was conducted based on a qualitative research paradigm using phenomenology. Phenomenology allows individuals experiencing a phenomenon to describe their experience exactly as it appear in their consciousness (Wertz, 2005). A phenomenological study provides the sensitive and sophisticated perspective needed to understand and describe the essence of day-to-day experiences of youth with disabilities (van Manen, 1997). It offers a descriptive, reflective, interpretive, and engaged mode of inquiry that seeks to understand and described the essence of experiences and enables underlying structures (themes) and commonalties in meanings to be understood. It is inherently hermeneutic in nature in that although the participants and spoke for themselves, to understand the commonality of meaning behind the experiences requires interpretation on the part of the researcher and reader (Allen & Jensen, 1990; van Manen, 1997).

### **Participants and Setting**

The participants were identified through purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study involved four (4) blind students from the School of Teacher Education, Saint Louis University, Baguio City. The participants were composed of two (2) males and two (2) females. Three of the participants are currently pursuing their graduate degree courses while the other participant is still taking his Bachelor's degree. Four (4) close friends of the blind students were also interviewed for the triangulation of data. The researchers in this study find the interview with the close friends of the blind students as rich source of information as to how these students perceive their tertiary class experiences. According to Zarbatany, Chezquiere, and Mohr (1992), friends are also considered as confidants. Hence, the friends of the blind students are knowledgeable of their experiences in their classes.

### **Materials and Procedures**

The researchers used audiotapes and field notes to gather data. An aide memoir was used during the semi-structured interview with the participants. Semi-structured interview as a method for data collection gives the respondents a forum to share their experiences and give the interviewer the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and to provide the opportunity to verify the data being recorded (Lincoln et al., 1985).

The purpose and procedure of the study was clearly explained to the respondents prior to the interview. The participants were asked to sign a consent form and were informed that they may quit from their participation any time they want. The interviews were conducted dependent on the convenience of the participants. The participants chose the place and time for the interview. Follow-up questions were asked until the saturation of the information. The interview lasted at least forty (40) minutes to one (1) hour.

All audiotapes and field notes were transcribed. The transcribed data that were in the “mother-tongue” were translated in English with the aid of a language teacher. The researcher went back to the participants to verify the transcriptions of the interviews and to ensure that the English translations of their statements were correct.

The researchers utilized Moustakas’ (1994) framework of data analysis of phenomenological design by beginning with repetitive listening of the audiotapes and readings of field notes and then isolating and extracting significant statements from the data. These statements were used to create meaning units, which were clustered into common themes.

## **Findings and Discussion**

After careful analyses of the transcribed data, two major themes emerged with three sub-themes each. The positive experiences have the following sub-themes: a) making me feel comfortable, b) making me feel motivated, and c) making me feel important. The sub-themes under the negative experiences include the following: a) making me feel discriminated, b) making me feel embarrassed, and (c) making me feel worried.

### **Positive Experiences**

The positive experiences of the blind students include their interesting and meaningful participation in their academic activities. The favorable experiences of the blind students in their classes make them feel comfortable, motivated, and important. Accordingly, learning is enhanced when students experience positive emotions in their classes.

#### *Making me feel comfortable*

The assistance and accommodations provided by the teachers and sighted students to the blind students make their learning conducive and allow them to feel at ease in their classes. Accordingly, three (3) of the participants in this study cited that their teachers and classmates are very accommodating which makes the class activities and requirements less stressful. In an interview with one of the participants he expressed that he did not have any problem in accessing their notes in class. He said, “My classmates dictate to me what is written on the board, and if I am not able to take note of all the important information, they lend me their notebook”. Another key informant said, “My teachers give me the soft copy of the lessons that is why I am able to participate in the class discussions”. Interestingly, these claims of the blind students were confirmed by their friends. For example, one of the friends of the blind student said, “It is the practice in the classes enrolled by my blind friend that if there is no soft copy, the person seated next to him dictates the notes on the board. Also during group activities, his group mates read the activity so that he can participate in the group discussions”.

Furthermore, the participants claimed that most of their teachers are non-threatening. The teachers consider their disability when giving major class requirements. As said by one key informant, “The teachers give alternative projects if they think the requirement is not feasible for me because of my eyesight problem. They see to it though that the purpose and quality of the project is not sacrificed”. Studies indicate that anxiety impairs performance on complex or difficult tasks that demand cognitive resources, and correlates negatively with achievement across age groups and academic domains (Hembree, 1988).

All four (4) participants in this study claimed that they take the same quiz and examination with their sighted classmates. However, they pointed out that their mode of taking the examination is different from their classmates. They explained that the teachers give different accommodations to them. One blind student said, "Most of my teachers give me the soft copy of the test questions. I do not have problems during quizzes because oftentimes, teachers dictate the questions". Another participant said, "My teacher records the questions for my examination". Furthermore, one of the friends of the blind students also cited that sometimes, the teachers ask the help of the staff of Institute of Inclusive Education (IIE) to braille the examination materials to accommodate the blind student.

The acts of kindness the classmates and teachers of the blind students make them feel good and encourage them to perform well in their classes. Accordingly, Espique and Lartec (2012) pointed out that blind students are not necessarily learning disabled. Students who are blind learn using their sense of touch and hearing (Sahin & Yorek, 2009). Blind students may only need appropriate support and accommodation because they entirely depend from their other senses due to the absence of their vision.

#### *Making me feel motivated*

Another positive experience of blind students is their involvement in their class activities and having a friendly environment. In terms of the engagement of the blind students to their class activities, one participant mentioned that he feels motivated to go to his classes because his teachers provide him manipulative materials during class activities. In his mathematics class for example, he said, "The mathematical problems presented to us are difficult. However, I enjoy solving because I can follow the solutions given by my teacher. The instructional materials provided by the teacher are indeed helpful to me". One participant also expressed, "I am challenged to study hard because I like to be able to share something to my classmates or to my group mates when there are group discussions". The active engagements of the blind students to their class activities make them feel satisfied and give them a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

Another factor that motivates the blind students to attend their classes is the inspiring words of their teachers. One friend of the blind student commented, "My friend always tells me that he looks forward to go to our class because our teacher gives encouraging words". Sharing positive outlook enthuse students to achieve their academic goals. Having sense of humor among teachers also encourages students to enter their classes. As cited by one participant, "Teachers who cracks jokes in class are motivating. They set a more welcoming class environment". This exposé from the participant on the importance of sense of humour of teachers agrees with the finding of Seidman and Brown (2013) sometimes humour can be a reason to come to class. Moreover, enjoyment of teaching, enthusiasm, helpfulness, and sense of humor are considered by undergraduate students as the important characteristics of teachers (Waters, Kemp, and Pucci, 1988).

According to one participant, she looks forward in going to school because of her classmates. She mentioned that she is happy whenever she is with her classmates. She said, "I am always excited to go to my classes because of my classmates. We treat each other like real family members". This kind of class bonding gives a sense of belongingness and support to blind students. The engagement of blind students is

positively related to the engagement level of their classmates or peers. Students who feel emotionally secure with their classmates and teachers are more likely to be active in class and to extend more effort in their academic endeavors.

#### *Making me feel important*

Another positive experience of the blind students is the special attention that is given by their classmates and teachers. The blind students feel important due to the extra time and effort extended to them by their classmates and teachers. One blind student said, "I feel like a very important person (VIP). My teachers spend extra time in preparing another material for me so I can participate in the class activities". Moreover, one of the friends of the blind student said, "Sometimes my friend would tell me that he feels so blessed because our classmates are always willing to help him". Another experience shared by one participant is that he feels so important to his classmates because of their concern in making sure that he is able to cope with the class discussion. Most of the participants pointed out that they feel valued when their classmates ask them if they can follow the class discussion and if they understood the instructions for certain class activities.

On the other hand, the blind students also feel their worth whenever they are able to do something for others. As stated by one participant, "I feel I am worthwhile whenever my classmates would ask me to do a favor for them or when they are asked to do some tasks for the group".

#### **Negative Experiences**

Just like any other student, the blind students do not always feel good in their classes. There are times when they feel discriminated, embarrassed, and worried because of some undesirable practices, activities, or events in their classes. Notably, these negative feelings of blind students directly influence their scholastic performance.

#### *Making me feel discriminated*

The participants narrated that there are times when they feel as if they do not belong to the class or to the group. One blind student said, "I feel like I do not belong to the group when my group mates do not bother to ask about my opinion of the group activity". Another factor that makes the blind students feel discriminated is when the teachers forget that they have a blind student. As mentioned by one participant, "Sometimes, my teachers forget that I am in the class. When explaining during class discussions, they write some important concepts on the board but they do not verbalize it". Missing out some important concepts during discussions can affect the students' understanding of the lesson. Hence, blind students may not be able to fully understand the lesson if teachers do not dictate to them the salient concepts.

Another factor that makes the blind students feel discriminated is when their classmates make them as their last choice when choosing their group mates. A friend of one of the blind students shared that her friend was hurt when she heard her classmates say, "We have no other choice but to include Ms..... in our group".

### *Making me feel embarrassed*

Blind students feel embarrassed when they are being compared to their classmates even when the intention of the comparison is to motivate others. For example, one participant said that she feels ashamed to her classmates whenever she hears her teachers saying, “Look class, how come Ms. .... or Mr. .... got higher score than you in the quiz or exam”. Comparing the performance of the blind students to the performance of their sighted peers create an awkward feeling to the students. One blind student said, “Well I’m really happy of my performance but I do not like to be compared to my classmates because I do not want them to think I am show off”.

Another event that makes the blind students feel embarrassed is when they have no idea of what is being laughed at by people around them. For example, one blind student said, “I feel embarrassed if I do not know why my classmates are suddenly laughing. Sometimes, I have this feeling that I am the one they are laughing at”.

Another experience of the participants that make them feel embarrass is when their classmate is dictating the lesson and they are not able to immediately take note. According to one blind student, “I feel embarrassed when my classmate keeps on repeating the sentence and I am not able to take note of it”.

### *Making me feel worried*

In most instances, the blind and sighted students have the same requirements and if there are accommodations given to the blind students, these do not excuse them from the anxiety of meeting the expected quality of the output and also the date of submission. Hence, one participant said, “My classmates are willing to help me but because I know that we have so many class requirements I am reluctant to ask their help. I do not like them to sacrifice their time for me”.

Another factor that makes the blind students feel worried is when the teachers do not give the rubrics of the activities or projects early. The rubrics for the activities help give direction to the students on the expectations of the teacher. The rubric sets the criteria that are needed to be satisfied by the students.

One of the participants also said, “I feel worried when my teachers change the venue for our class especially if I am not informed early and that the place is new to me. With my condition, I cannot easily go from one place to the other”. Blind students need mobility orientation before they can travel on their own.

### **Conclusion**

This study describes the experiences of the blind students in inclusive tertiary classes through their feelings towards their encounters with their teacher, classmates, and class activities. Two major themes emerged: positive experiences and negative experiences. Positive experiences involve events that make the blind students’ feel comfortable, motivated, and important. On the other hand, the negative experiences of the blind students are those that make them feel discriminated, b) embarrassed, and (c) worried. These findings imply that inclusion of blind students in the tertiary classes is not a life in heaven. Blind students encounter challenges in their classes.

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