

Creating Inclusive Learning Communities: Training Receiving Learners as Advocates for Inclusion

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Abstract- Inclusive education requires not only institutional commitment but also the active engagement of learners who interact daily with peers of diverse abilities in mainstream classrooms. This study examines the perceptions and live experiences of receiving learners that can result in developing a support program in training receiving learners to develop advocacy skills that promote inclusive practices. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions. Findings of the study reveal that receiving learners developed heightened awareness of diversity, increased willingness to support peers with special educational needs, and greater confidence in promoting inclusive practices within and beyond the classroom. By positioning learners as advocates, the training not only strengthens classroom inclusivity but also cultivates a culture of acceptance that extends into the wider community.

Keywords: Inclusive education; receiving learners; learner advocacy; peer support; special educational needs; mainstream classrooms; inclusive practices; learner engagement.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to UNICEF, there are 240 million children with disabilities worldwide and disability is one of the most serious blockades to education across the globe. The Department of Education is mandated to provide every Filipino access to quality education that will enable them to realize their full potential. The Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities (RA 7277) further obliges the state to adopt policies ensuring the rehabilitation, self - development and self - reliance of people with disabilities and to develop their skills and potential.

DepEd's current Enhanced Basic education program (DepEd Order No. 43, s. 2013) recognizes the diversity of learners and promotes inclusivity by implementing programs that are sensitive and responsive to the varied situation, nature and realities of Filipino learners. The goal is to include children with special needs in a regular classroom and allow them to learn side by side with others. Likewise, DepEd Order No. 44 s. 2021, entitled Policy Guidelines on the Provision of Educational Program and Services for Learners with Disabilities in the K to 12 Basic Education Program aims to provide an overall direction and guidance in the organization, management, implementation of appropriate and relevant programs, services and other educational

interventions at the different levels of governance for learners with disabilities regardless of their gender, race, culture, ethnicity, religion and economic status. As part of the

State to continually promote Inclusive Education, RA 11650 also known as the Inclusive Education Act that mandates the integration of children with disabilities into regular education systems and ensures that they receive appropriate support and services. This act shows commitment to equal educational opportunities for all learners, regardless of their disabilities.

General Emilio Aguinaldo National High School is one with this advocacy and integrates SNED (Special Needs Education) students into regular classrooms. In a study conducted by Lachica & Madrid (2019) for the School Year 2018-2019, receiving students (non-SNED learners) have a generally positive attitude towards inclusion. This is when the school is just starting to roll out the program for inclusion. For the school year 2024-2025, there are 6 females and 12 males that sums up to a total of 22 SNED students from different grade levels that are included in a regular classroom. There are 4 SNED students placed into a grade 7 regular classroom, 4 in grade 8, a total of 7 SNED learners in grade 9 inclusion and in grade 10.

While this promotes inclusivity and would greatly influence the SNED students' holistic development, the receiving learners who spent most of their school days interacting and learning with them may lack adequate knowledge about their role in fostering an inclusive environment. Much of the focus of existing programs are on curriculum adaptation and teacher training, and the perception of receiving learners remains unexplored. Understanding their perspectives on inclusion is crucial for developing meaningful interventions that empower them as advocates.

This study aims to gather the perceptions of receiving learners regarding inclusion and use their insights to design a program that equips them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to become advocates for inclusive education. This research will identify gaps in awareness and interaction and propose strategies to promote genuine inclusivity and advocacy among students.

A. Objectives

- **General Objective:** To explore how receiving learners perceive inclusion and use their insights to design a program that can transform them into active advocates for inclusive education.
- **Specific Research Questions:**
 1. What are the current perceptions of receiving learners regarding inclusion in General Emilio Aguinaldo National High School?
 2. What challenges and opportunities do they identify in supporting their peers with diverse learning needs?
 3. What strategies can be implemented to enhance receiving learners' role as advocates for inclusive education?

II. METHODS

A. Participants and Sources of Data

The participants of this study will be receiving students from different sections, where at least one SNED student is enrolled. Purposive sampling will be used to ensure that only students who regularly interact with their SNED classmates are included in the study. From 21 sections with an inclusion

program, 8 students will be selected as participants. This sampling method ensures that the data collected is relevant and meaningful, as it focuses on individuals with direct experience in inclusive education.

B. Data Analysis Plan

This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore how non-SPED students perceive inclusion and how an awareness program can transform them into active advocates for their SPED classmates. Using in-depth interviews and focus group discussion with eight non-SPED students from different sections, the research aims to unveil their lived experiences, perspectives, and personal transformations regarding inclusive education.

The result of this study will be analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which focuses on the individual's perspective and attempts to provide detailed explanations and microanalyses of specific cases. The analysis will be followed by a systematic process of thematic coding, interpretation and synthesis to capture the essence of the participants' experiences. All interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to maintain participant confidentiality. The transcripts will be reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data before beginning the formal analysis.

The study will use multiple validation strategies to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings. First, the participants will review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Second, a peer debriefing will be conducted to help minimize researcher bias, while triangulation will compare findings across different interviews to identify consistent themes. Additionally, to enhance the transferability of the findings to similar educational contexts, rich and thick descriptions will be provided.

III. RESULTS

The interviews with non-SNED learners highlighted a range of experiences and perceptions regarding their classmates with special needs. Several key themes emerged from the data.

- **Emotional Experiences**

Analysis of participant responses revealed a recurring theme centered on the dynamic range of emotional experiences. Six distinct emotions were identified, each representing different positions along the spectrum of affective states: confused, surprised, nervous and fear feeling happy and normal as usual towards having a classmate with special needs.

"Pag once po nag tantrum na siya doon na kami parang natatakot na baka mamaya na manakit siya..."

"Na – feel ko po like kinakabahan po kasi baka hindi ko po sila kaya or baka po hindi nila kaya i-handle yung mangyayari sa room namin."

"...wala naman po, normal lang po kasi hindi naman po siya yung parang may special na pangangailangan, yung maligalig..."

- **Challenges in Socialization**

Some students acknowledged difficulties in socializing with learners with special needs because sometimes they feel uncertain about how to respond, leading to reduced interaction.

"Ang problema lang po pag may practice hindi siya nakiki join kasi po hindi niya masyadong bet yung ka – group niya kasi maiingay."

"Hindi po siya nakikipag participate pag hindi niya po gusto yung activity like yung sayaw po namin."

- **Human Relationships**

The research gathered a consistent pattern across the response of the participants from the interview, highlighting a core theme of empathy-driven interpersonal values. Four distinct but interrelated qualities emerged: respect, understanding, sensitivity, and patience.

"Kami po yung dapat na more on mag intindi...alam po namin na iba yung isip nila sa amin so dapat marunong po kaming umintindi"

"Kaya po naming ibigay sa kaniya yung respect na deserve niya po."

"Kapag hindi niya na po talaga kaya gawin yung mga gagawin niya, nandito po talaga kami para tulungan siya, hintay din po..patience po kaya din namin ibigay sa kaniya."

- **Strategies and Programs**

The analysis of participants' feedback revealed several strategies and programs that may help to support inclusive education. Some were personal initiatives and others look forward to stronger support from the school.

"Dapat po may forum tapos ididiscuss po yung mga needs po ng kaklase naming SPED at yung mga kailangan po namin gawin para ma – help po namin sila sa mga lesson at di nila maintindihan."

"Ang tinuturo po namin sa kaniya ngayon is yung paghihingi

po siya...'wag yung give me lang, dapat can I..."

"Hindi po namin siya kinoconsider as student with special needs like kinoconsider lang po namin siya as regular classmate."

"Ipakalat sa simpleng paraan po na may nakakasalamuha tayo sa school na may mga special needs."

Overall, the data gathered from this research illustrates that human relationships and emotional experiences are deeply intertwined with the challenges of socialization in inclusive settings. While there are barriers that emerged, positive emotions such as happiness and feelings of normalcy reflected the potential for meaningful connections when supportive environments were present. The findings further highlight that regular students play a critical role as advocates for inclusion: through respect, sensitivity, and patience, they can foster understanding, reduce social barriers, and actively promote equity. Taken together, these results suggest that inclusive education is strengthened not only by the efforts of promoting institutional strategies and programs but also by the everyday actions of peers who embrace advocacy, empathy, and collaboration as essential components of social integration.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings presented in the Results section focus on the multifaceted nature of human relationships, emotional experiences, and the challenges of socialization in inclusive classrooms.

These outcomes underscore that while barriers can hinder peer interaction, positive emotions and supportive strategies create opportunities for meaningful connection between regular students and learners with special needs. Importantly, the role of non-SNED students as advocates emerged as a central theme, suggesting that peer-driven initiatives—grounded in respect, sensitivity, and patience—can significantly enhance inclusivity.

The interviews with non-SNED learners provide valuable insights into how students without special needs perceive and experience interactions with classmates who require additional support. These results will be interpreted considering existing literature, examined for their practical implications in educational contexts, and considered as a basis for future recommendations to strengthen inclusive practices.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights about the perceptions of receiving learners toward inclusion at General Emilio Aguinaldo National High School. Learners expressed appreciation for the presence of peers with special needs, noting that inclusion fosters empathy, patience, and respect within the classroom community. Receiving learners view inclusive education is also beneficial for themselves as they have learned practices that promote compassion and cooperation. The results suggest that students generally recognize the importance of inclusive education, though their experiences reveal both positive attitudes and notable challenges.

Some areas of concern gathered from the data cited difficulties in social interaction and communication, particularly when peers with special needs struggled to interpret social cues which led to feelings of discomfort among receiving learners, echoing prior studies that identify socialization as a critical barrier in inclusive education. Another challenge was emotional regulation, where receiving learners observed that frustration, anxiety, or withdrawal among peers with diverse needs sometimes disrupt the learning environment and interactions. Learners somehow fear the SNED learners as they exhibit meltdowns at times which made their peers puzzled

on how to navigate emotionally complex situations. Despite these challenges, learners also identified meaningful opportunities. Many of them still emphasized that having a classmate with special needs fosters empathy, patience, and respect, allowing them to grow personally while supporting their peers. It allows them to learn to adjust to situations and recognize their potential to strengthen social bonds and reduce isolation.

Taking together, these perceptions reveal a balanced view: while challenges in communication, social awareness, and emotional regulation persist, students also see inclusion as an opportunity for growth, advocacy, and more inclusive environment. Receiving learners' effectiveness as advocates for inclusion can be strengthened through peer education and awareness programs. Equipping receiving learners with knowledge about diverse learning needs, these programs foster empathy and reduce misconceptions. This aligns with existing literature that highlights the importance of awareness campaigns in shifting attitudes and promoting acceptance. Additionally, institutional support and recognition - such as leadership opportunities, certificates, or school-wide campaigns—motivate learners to sustain their involvement. This recognition reinforces the idea that advocacy is not peripheral but central to the school's inclusive mission.

In conclusion, this study underscores that empowering receiving learners as advocates for inclusive education requires more than goodwill. Integrating peer education programs, mentoring systems, communication training, and recognition initiatives, schools can transform learners' willingness into sustained action. The success of the success of inclusive education depends on equipping all students to see themselves not just as participants, but as active partners in shaping a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

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