

EMBRACING DIVERSITY: EMPOWERMENT OF FILIPINO PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Genalyn P. Lualhati

College of Teacher Education, Batangas State University-JPLPC Malvar, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Corresponding author:
Genalyn P. Lualhati
mrsualhati@gmail.com

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The increasing diversity in schools requires in-depth understanding of pedagogical approaches to teach diverse populations. This requirement demands Teacher Education Institutions to develop among pre-service teachers positive attitude towards inclusion and prepare and train them to deliver inclusive practices in a mainstream classroom. This study investigated the attitude towards inclusive education, perceived level of readiness to implement inclusive education and assessment on the effectiveness of teacher education program for inclusive education in terms of collaborative teaching, techniques and strategies and collaborative experiences among pre-service teachers in one state university in Batangas Province, Philippines. Using descriptive-survey as research design with researcher-made questionnaire as tool to gather data, results have shown that the respondents have high positive attitude ($\bar{x}=3.57$) towards inclusive education. Further, the study also revealed that the respondents have high perception ($\bar{x}=3.63$) on their readiness to implement inclusive education. Lastly, teacher education program for inclusive education along with collaborative teaching and techniques and strategies were highly effective ($\bar{x}=3.51$ and $\bar{x}=3.55$ respectively), while effective ($\bar{x}=3.49$) only in terms of collaborative experiences. Analyses of the findings afforded the researcher to formulate recommendations that higher authorities may use as inputs in formulating and designing programs to better empower future teachers to embrace diversity.

Keywords: Embracing diversity; pre-service; inclusive education

1. INTRODUCTION

Around the globe, the inclusion in a regular classroom setting of children with differences for reasons of disability, development, ethnicity, race, religion, language, gender and poverty became a significant educational policy reform. This development is believed to be the key in helping students with disabilities and special needs (SWDASNs) hone their own skills and unleash their maximum potentials. Kurth and Mastergeorge (2012); MAPSA (2011) and Matzen et al. (2010) acknowledged SWDASNs are more engaged in their learning when they are included in a mainstream classroom. Also, alignment of learning to grade level competencies is ensured which can boost their sense of well-being.

Due to this, the Department of Education (DepEd) driven by the urgency to address this need, therefore promises the right for these children to be given proper education within the regular or inclusive classroom setting (DepEd, 2009). Corollary to this, Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) in the country must produce graduates who are equipped with knowledge and skills to perform non-discriminatory classroom practices. Teacher education programs are encouraged to train competent pre-service teachers who are ready to meet the demands of inclusivity (Bilbao, 2016). It is within this premise that the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has mandated all TEIs to include a course relevant to inclusive education in all programs offered.

Along with responsive curriculum and effective quality training and preparation, pre-service teachers' attitude towards inclusive education is equally important to develop because this can ensure that they will facilitate inclusive practices in their own classrooms. Further, positive attitude may result to willingness to address any gaps in the formal instruction by proving curriculum modifications suitable to SWDASNs. Dapudong (2014) reiterated that to meet the goals of inclusion to a great extent, the teachers' awareness, attitudes, and skills on inclusion must be strengthened.

Despite various initiatives carried out by DepEd, CHED and TEIs, Muega (2016) found out that several educational institutions lack teachers to implement inclusive education. The overall response of the teachers suggests they are not prepared to handle SWDASNs in a regular classroom. This data indicates that it is deemed necessary to conduct a research relevant to pre-service teachers' attitude and level of readiness to implement inclusive education and the effectiveness of teacher education preparation program for inclusive education.

This study was conceptualized with the notion that TEIs are important in producing graduates ready for inclusive education. The aspiration to mold the next pool of teachers who are sensitive enough to the needs of various learners motivated the researcher to conduct a study that focuses on empowering future elementary and secondary Filipino teachers for inclusive education, with an end of view of offering recommendations to higher authorities to serve as inputs for planning and designing programs to empower future teachers for inclusive education. Specifically, this study investigated the attitude of pre-service teachers towards inclusive education; the respondents' perceived level of readiness to implement inclusive education; and lastly, the respondents' assessment on the effectiveness of teacher education program for inclusive education in collaborative teaching, techniques and strategies, and collaborative experiences. For educators handling professional education courses in teacher education programs, this paper is crucial as this can strengthen obligation and commitment among faculty members in preparing education students to be a good implementer of inclusive education.

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study utilized the Model for Inclusive Teacher Preparation proposed by Whitworth (1999) as its frame of reference. The aforementioned model presents a system and practices for TEIs to follow in order to empower teachers to deliver instruction in inclusive classroom settings. According to him, a teacher education program preparation must focus on strengthening understanding and appreciation of diversity among pre-service teachers to be effective. Figure 1 shows Whitworth's proposed Model for Inclusive Teacher Preparation.

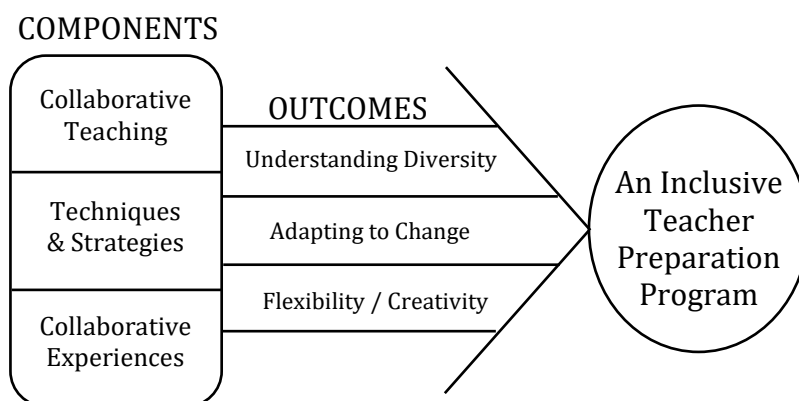


Figure 1: Whitworth's Proposed Model for Inclusive Teacher Preparation

Three components such as collaborative teaching, techniques and strategies, and collaborative experiences are vital for inclusive approach to teacher preparation. These components suggest that future

teachers must be trained on how to select, plan, organize and implement various instructional approaches, arrangements and tools to properly accommodate students with diverse needs and adapt to classroom changes. The third component focuses on field-based experiences of the pre-service teacher. This calls for a teacher preparation to include varied learning opportunities, both inside and outside the university, to better work and observe an actual inclusive education implementation.

Asserting its significance in this study, this model reflects the necessary components all Teacher Education institutions (TEIs) need in order to prepare and train future teachers for inclusive education. Nguyet and Ha (2010) said that teacher candidates must be equipped with knowledge and understanding of learners' special needs and abilities, as well as pedagogic skills to include varied teaching strategies, instructional accommodation and activity differentiation. However, Corpuz and Gloria (2014) and Kim (2011) acknowledged that teacher education program preparation is not enough for inclusive education to be successful; it is equally important that pre-service teachers develop a positive attitude towards inclusive education. They must be firmly convinced of the benefits it could bring to students' welfare and well-being for both regular students and those with disabilities. This indicates that TEIs must also formulate the course of activities to increase students' awareness and attitudinal change on inclusivity.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research design and methods

Descriptive-survey research design was used in this study since it gathered data on pre-service teachers' attitude, level of readiness, and effectiveness of teacher education preparation program for inclusive education using a researcher-made questionnaire.

Respondents

A total of 114 respondents participated in this study. These are 23 Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) students, 18 Bachelor of Physical Education (BPEd), and 73 Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) under the College of Teacher Education, Batangas State University, JPLPC Malvar, Philippines, during the Academic Year 2020-2021. These respondents are the next pool of teachers to work in diverse settings; hence, they are purposively chosen as respondents with a belief that their role is important in implementing inclusive education (Nguyet and Ha, 2010). Moreover, they successfully finished and passed courses relevant to special and inclusive education which made them more suitable to be respondents of this study.

Research instrument

A three-part researcher-made questionnaire was utilized to gather relevant information needed in this study. Part I is a 10-item questionnaire to reveal the attitude of the respondents towards inclusive education; part II is composed of 11 items to determine the level of readiness on inclusive education; and lastly, a 15-item questionnaire to determine the effectiveness of teacher education preparation program for inclusive education in terms of collaborative teaching, techniques and strategies, and collaborative experiences.

To facilitate the interpretation of the computed mean, the following mean ranges with their corresponding interpretations were used:

Scale	Mean Ranges	Interpretations
4	3.51-4.00	Strongly Agree (SA) /Highly Positive (HP) /Highly Ready (HR)/ Highly Effective (HE)
3	2.51-3.50	Agree (A)/Positive(P)/Ready(R)/Effective(E)
2	1.51-2.50	Slightly Agree (SA)/ Moderately Positive (MP)/ Moderately Ready (MR)/Moderately Effective (ME)
1	1.00- 1.50	Disagree (D)/Negative (N)/ Not Ready (NR)/ Not Effective (NE)

Three experts in the field of special and inclusive education assisted the researcher to ensure the instrument's content validity. Through the help of a statistician, the instrument was reliable as manifested by the obtained .849 alpha coefficient.

Data collection and analysis procedures

To explain the purpose of the study and seek permission from the pre-service teachers to serve as respondents, a consent form was prepared by the researcher. Confidentiality of the information collected among them is ensured for ethical purposes. Approval was sought from higher authorities to distribute the questionnaire through a communication letter that was also prepared by the researcher. Upon approval, she

personally distributed, administered and retrieved the questionnaire. Gathered data were checked, tallied, scored, and treated through the use of Weighted Mean.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part shows the presentation, interpretation and analysis of data that were organized and presented based on specific problems posed by the researcher.

Attitude of the pre-service teachers towards inclusive education

The goal of every higher education institutions is to produce teachers who may serve as catalyst for inclusivity; hence, it is significant to understand initially the future teachers' developed attitudes towards inclusive education. Table 1 shows the results of the inquiry on attitude of the pre-service teachers towards inclusive education.

Table 1: Attitude of the Pre-service Teachers towards Inclusive Education

Indicators	Mean	VI
1. Every child regardless of disabilities and needs has a right to learn in the regular class.	3.82	SA
2. Students with disabilities and special needs better develop social and emotional skills when they are included in a regular class.	3.99	SA
3. Regular students become more appreciative of differences when they are grouped with students with disabilities and special needs.	3.56	SA
4. Inclusive teaching approaches is a successful university practice to address learners' differences and needs.	3.42	A
5. Students with behavioral problems should be educated in regular classrooms, with proper support and accommodation.	3.65	SA
6. Students with disabilities and special needs challenge me to provide better ways to educate all students by providing meaningful learning environment.	3.47	A
7. All teachers must give extra time and effort into creating such optimal classroom settings.	3.44	A
8. Inclusive classrooms may lessen stigmatization, stereotyping and discrimination.	3.30	A
9. Integrating students with disabilities into the mainstream of education advances the academic performance for all children.	3.55	SA
10. Students with disabilities/special needs must be provided with sensible accommodations and effective individualized educational program (IEP).	3.46	A
Overall	3.57	HP

The respondents strongly agreed (3.99) that integrating students with disabilities in a regular classroom helps them develop emotionally and socially. Moreover, they also strongly agreed that (3.82) that it is everyone's right to learn in a regular classroom. These findings may imply that the faculty members fostered among pre-service teachers the right values and attitudes towards students with disabilities through training and experiences. This acquired behavior and belief could be a good indicator that these future teachers may facilitate inclusive practices inside their classrooms. According to Duka (2011), the appropriate way to address and modify educators' negative attitudes towards inclusion is through pre-service training.

In general, the respondents' attitude towards inclusive education was highly positive (3.57). The result showing that they have highly positive attitude towards inclusive education suggests that they can maximize opportunities for fostering a classroom environment friendly and supportive to SWD. The studies of Goddard and Evans (2018) and Varcoe and Boyle (2014), which also revealed generally positive attitude towards inclusive education among pre-service teachers, reinforce the result.

Perceived level of readiness to implement inclusive education

Quality teacher education preparation to meet the learning needs of SWD is vital for a successful inclusive education. This portion shows the respondents' perceived level of readiness to implement inclusive education. It is reflected in Table 2.

Pre-service teachers strongly agreed (3.81) that they are ready to adjust curriculum and instruction by providing adaptations and/or accommodations. This mirrors that SWD has an opportunity to explore and learn the course material and may have meaningful access to the lesson in a regular setting because the respondents are ready to provide instructional accommodations and adaptation for them. Bohning (2000) said that teachers made adaptations in a regular classroom whenever it is appropriate while Ford (2013) reiterated the need for placement decisions considering the resources available in educating SWDs.

Meanwhile, they strongly agreed (3.78) that they can observe differentness or educational problems of the students. The result showed that they are capable to observe students' behavior inside the classroom and implies that they can identify students who might need support and intervention. However, the respondents agreed (3.38) that they can make comprehensive anecdotal records, referral forms and endorsement letters. This lowest rated item suggests that the pre-service teachers may be further exposed to training relevant to students' behavior records. The capability to do objective observation and effective collection of data on students' behavior are two important skills that pre-service teachers must possess because these may help facilitate which among the students needed supports and the kind of intervention or program needed to address the concern. Drogan and Knoster (2016) mentioned that educators should prioritize behaviors that are deemed the greatest concern and make a list of data collection procedures suitable to the situation.

Overall, the respondents highly perceived that they are ready (3.63) to implement inclusive education. This means that the respondents received training and preparation to carry out the roles and responsibilities of a teacher in an inclusive classroom. Hay et al. (2001) revealed that training is important to strengthen teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in implementing inclusive education. This high perception result is supported by Loreman et al. (2013) which also revealed that the pre-service and in-service teachers are ready, equipped and have a high degree of intention to teach in inclusive classrooms.

Table 2: Perceived Level of Readiness to Implement Inclusive Education

Indicators	Mean	VI
1. I have the ability to observe and recognize differentness or educational problems such as behavioral, academic, attendance, social or health.	3.78	SA
2. I can make comprehensive anecdotal records, referral forms and endorsement letters.	3.38	A
3. I can establish an open and pleasant communication with the parents.	3.57	SA
4. I can ensure parents' comfort in coming to school should consultation has to be made.	3.52	SA
5. I can work harmoniously with school's consultation teams (e.g., school counsellor, school nurse, principal, and psychologist) in designing learning plans.	3.76	SA
6. I can collaborate with Multidisciplinary Teams (e.g. physical therapist, occupational therapist, and speech language pathologist) in making Individualized Educational Program (IEP).	3.67	SA
7. I can design learning plans to cater the individual needs of students with disabilities.	3.62	SA
8. I can use different assessment strategies suitable to the learners' needs.	3.53	SA
9. I can plan and organize specific adaptations/accommodations to adjust curriculum and instructional components.	3.81	SA
10. I can modify the learning goal or objective to better suit the learning level of the students.	3.67	SA
11. I can manage disorderly behavior inside the classroom.	3.66	SA
Overall	3.63	HR

Effectiveness of teacher education program for inclusive education

Teacher Education Institutions must recognize the demand for equitable and accessible education for all. Therefore, the program must focus on practices for inclusions which cover collaborative teaching, techniques and strategies and collaborative experiences. The succeeding tables reflect the pre-service teachers' assessments on the effectiveness of teacher education program for inclusive education.

1. Collaborative teaching

Table 3 presents the respondents' assessment on collaborative teaching. It can be gleaned on the table that all indicators to reveal the effectiveness of collaborative teaching as a component of teacher education program were strongly agreed by the respondents. This implies that the teacher education program effectively trained them to work collaboratively with other teachers in doing lessons, assessments tasks and IEP implementation.

Table 3: Effectiveness of Teacher Education Program for Inclusive Education in Terms of Collaborative Teaching

Indicators	Mean	VI
The Teacher Education Program...		
1. teaches me how to plan collaboratively with other instructional facilitator regarding lessons and assessments.	3.60	SA
2. trains me to jointly deliver instruction using high-involvement strategies.	3.50	SA
3. makes me skilled in working with special education teacher.	3.49	A
4. educates me to implement IEP goals in a general education classroom.	3.46	A
5. trains me to effectively manage shared classroom space; where instruction in an alternative setting is observed.	3.52	SA
Overall	3.51	HE

Generally, the table shows that the respondents' assessment on the effectiveness of teacher education program for inclusive education in terms of collaborative teaching was high (3.51). The highly effective result shows that the teacher education program has trained the respondents to co-teach classes and make collaborative learning arrangements and activities. This also suggests that these pre-service teachers can heighten SWDASNs' educational experience and learning outcomes. Mulholland (2016) mentioned that primary teachers are aware of collaboration and its importance which is favorable because this can foster cooperation among teachers and help in achieving desired results.

2. Techniques and strategies

Table 4 shows the respondents' assessment on techniques and strategies.

Table 4: Effectiveness of Teacher Education Program for Inclusive Education Program in terms of Techniques and Strategies

Indicators	Mean	VI
The Teacher Education Program...		
1. prepares me to use multi-level teaching, interactive discussion, cooperative learning and peer tutoring as instructional activities.	3.55	SA
2. makes me learn to adapt curriculum content with the needs of student in the class.	3.60	SA
3. trains me to select appropriate materials, resources and supports to be used for diverse students.	3.62	SA
4. prepares me to modify materials and resources should the needs arise.	3.49	A
5. educates me to set appropriate, realistic and measurable goals and evaluation measures for the students.	3.50	A
Overall	3.55	HE

The table reflects that the student-respondents agreed (3.50) that the teacher education program is effective in teaching them suitable learning goals and assessment while the remaining indicators were strongly agreed upon by the respondents. The lowest ranked item signifies that the faculty members handling the program may further reinforce lessons and discussion regarding setting SMART goals and selecting assessment design and analysis. These competencies are important because this will guide learners' improvement plus improving the instruction as well. According to Galevska and Pesic (2018), assessing the educational improvement of SWDs requires accurate and unique guidance in applying the evaluation practices in the inclusive classrooms.

The overall computed mean (3.55) indicates that the teacher education program is highly effective in training them suitable techniques and strategies for inclusive education. This result means that the program has equipped them with knowledge and skills on teaching and learning modes appropriate to actively engage, include, and challenge regular students and SWDs. Bender (2002) stated that to satisfy the learning needs of SWD, teachers must work together to differentiate instruction and modify instructional practices.

3. Collaborative experiences

Table 5 presents the respondents' assessments on collaborative experiences. The table shows that the respondents strongly agreed (3.60 and 3.56) that the program allows them to perform simulation, role play and collaborative works. These results suggest that the respondents are exposed to classroom activities that allow them to do simulations and cooperative learning tasks. On the other hand, the students agreed (3.39) that the college invites special education teacher as resource person. This means that the college may regularly invite experts in the area of special and inclusive education. This may supplement the lessons given by the regular classroom teacher. In her article, Bouillet (2013) stated that few specialists support teachers and students through giving comprehensive lectures concerning inclusive practices in schools.

Table 5: Effectiveness of Teacher Education Program for Inclusive Education Program in Terms of Collaborative Experiences

Indicators	Mean	VI
The Teacher Education Program...		
1. allows me to work in collaborative and inclusive classrooms.	3.56	SA
2. exposes me to an actual inclusive classroom through field study and observation.	3.45	A
3. allows us to perform simulation and role play relevant to inclusive education.	3.60	SA
4. organizes seminars and extra-curricular activities that promote inclusive practices.	3.44	A
5. invites special education teachers to share their personal experiences and practices in class.	3.39	A
Overall	3.49	E

In general, the students' assessment on teacher education program in terms of collaborative experiences was effective (3.49). The effective result signifies that the teacher education program may further provide collaborative experiences among the pre-service teachers. Doing this could result to enhanced awareness and knowledge on the kind of professional support and resources they need to better satisfy the needs of SWDs. As mentioned by Kuusisaari (2013), there are barriers to teacher collaborations due to inadequate focuses during team discussions and a lack of curriculum leadership.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To be ready for the demands of inclusivity, TEIs must produce graduates who can teach in settings that can meet the needs of diverse students. It is within this notion that this study had been conducted. This study revealed that the respondents have positive attitude and high perception on their readiness to implement inclusive education. Moreover, this study discovered that the teacher education program for inclusive education along with collaborative teaching techniques and strategies were highly effective, while effective only in terms of collaborative experiences.

In consonance with the above cited results, maintaining positive attitude towards inclusion among pre-service teachers is encouraged to be done through continuous training and workshops, development of mass media activities and materials, and integration of inclusion in various courses. Further, it is suggested that the pre-service teachers may be further exposed to preparation relevant to objective observation and effective collection of data on students' behavior. The college may invite in-service teachers and other professionals as resource persons to teach them how to write documents like anecdotal records and referral forms. Also, these invited experts may teach the pre-service teachers how to craft, plan and implement Individualized Education Plans.

Further, the teacher education program has only one professional education course relevant to special and inclusive education, hence, it is suggested that the Council of Deans may review and revisit the curriculum for additional courses relevant to inclusion. Faculty members are encouraged to integrate inclusive education across all courses to better equip the pre-service teachers with essential pedagogic knowledge and skills to accommodate SWDASNs in the regular classroom.

Lastly, a follow-up study using other variables may be conducted to further gather data on pre-service teachers' attitude and readiness to implement inclusive education.

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