

Inclusive education policies: Solidifying actions and opportunities to accommodate persons with disabilities

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Abstract: Following UNESCO's emphasis on Sustainable Development Goal No. 4, particularly on the provision of quality inclusive education, global policy-making agencies and renowned organizations have been engaged in improving the educational policies that should be enacted and maintained by various countries across the world. This article underlines the urgent need to enhance policies, particularly those pertaining to inclusive education that would reach out to the society's marginalized groups, particularly persons with disabilities. In the Philippine context, initiatives partaking education for all are being implemented as a way to build an inclusive society that provides equal learning opportunities to all learners. Concerns in existing inclusive education policies are reviewed, revealing several findings on the issue's current situation. Given the certain policies and mandates, such information seeks to analyze the improvisation of actions and responses to be executed in order to accommodate all learners around the world.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Inclusion policies, Persons with disabilities

1. Introduction

Implementing effective inclusive education policies is regarded critical in order to carry out practical actions and solutions to eradicate the underlying educational disparities affecting all types of learners. As defined by UNESCO (2021a), Inclusion is an approach that attempts to address and acknowledge the diversity in needs of all children, youth, and adults within education, through expanding involvement in learning, cultures, and communities, as well as decreasing and eradicating exclusion. In addition, as emphasized by UNESCO (2021a), the scope of special needs has evolved over time to encompass factors like gender, health and nutrition status, language, location, culture, religion, and economic status in addition to disabilities and cognitive functioning across all groups. These factors are frequently seen as roadblocks to the attainment of the Education for All (EFA) movement. As a global concern, the urgent need to establish an inclusive learning environment drives practitioners to examine and prioritize the immediate needs of each student since they are at risk of being left behind and disadvantaged in society. Through this safe space, the learners with disabilities are then able to exhibit their talents and abilities without fear of being judged or segregated in this secure area. This should be maintained and prioritized further in order to guarantee that every learner actively participates in school activities. Moreover, an inclusive learning environment refers to the educational institution's planned educational programs, policies, and activities that include not only students but also school teachers, stakeholders, and, most importantly, the learners' parents. This fosters a good relationship among all members, ensuring that everyone relishes the opportunity to participate in the school's decision-making, activities, and programs.

2. A greater emphasis on inclusive policies

Globally, policy-making bodies and renowned organizations have been striving to improve inclusive education policies that should be adopted and implemented by various nations across the globe. As stressed by UNESCO (2021b), the Education 2030 Agenda was created with the goal of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting opportunities for lifelong learning for everyone. It is to

guarantee everyone will be entitled to equal access to education as an important human right. This punctuates that as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, educational policies and programs should be purposefully devised to ensure that everyone have equal rights to access and benefit from quality education as part of the Sustainable Development Goal 4. According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report for 2020, the lack of enthusiasm that inclusion is desired and attainable is a serious impediment to inclusion in education whereas in 43 predominantly upper-middle and high-income nations in 2018, one in three teachers claimed they did not adapt their instruction to the cultural diversity of their students. In addition, the report also revealed that all students who are at risk of exclusion encounter similar forms of discrimination, stereotyping, and stigmatization, while 68% of nations have outlined inclusive education, only 57% of such definitions include several disadvantaged groups (UNESCO, 2020). These findings depict that gaps concerning inclusive education continues to widen, thus becomes a developing concern as well as a threat on ensuring social justice and educational stability. As the means to address this, SDG 4 upholds to the eradication of gender inequities in education, the guarantee of increased accessibility to all levels of education, and the promotion of vocational training for the most disadvantaged, including individuals with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in difficult circumstances. With this, countries and governments throughout the world are called to actively participate in enacting laws and policies directed at offering inclusive and equitable quality education to guarantee that all learners are accommodated as they acquire appropriate knowledge and abilities that would support lifelong learning.

3. Inclusion at a national context

In the context of the Philippine educational system, the Department of Education organizes programs as well as policies that support children with special needs and learners with disabilities. One of which is the Department Order No. 72, s.2009 entitled "Inclusive Education as Strategy for Increasing Participation Rate of Children" that includes three programs, namely full inclusion, partial inclusion, and self-contained in Special Education (Department of Education, 2009). In addition, a law was mandated in the country, or the RA 11650: An Act Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities in Support in Inclusive Education, Establishing Inclusive Learning Resource Centers of Learners with Disabilities in all School Districts, Municipalities and Cities, Providing for Standards, Appropriating Funds Therefor, and For Other Purposes, which is designed to address the country's yearning to abolish barriers through providing accessible and quality education to all learners (Philippine Government, 2022). Given these mandates, the lack of teachers, facilities, classrooms, and suitable resources for learning materials continues to pose a problem to the implementation owing to a lack of materials as well as assistance, particularly for the country's disadvantaged sectors. With this, Allam and Martin (2021) suggested that the school heads must create an active organization to foster the stakeholders' strong support along with the administrators of special education programs that would strictly abide by the implemented policies and regulations.

Furthermore, in addition to addressing the educational necessities, it is equally important to prioritize an individual's overall wellness, including their mental and emotional well-being, as this is a crucial component of the learners' motivation to learn. As affirmed in the Republic Act 11036 or "The Mental Health Act", the development of inclusive policies and practices in terms of integrating mental healthcare policies, programs, and strategies in the basic health services in educational institutions, workplace, and communities is heightened (Philippine Government, 2018). In accordance with the actualization of such policies developed to mitigate stereotypes and discrimination against people with disabilities and people with mental health conditions, the government ought to foster inclusivity for the provision of mental healthcare, whereas inclusivity is integrated into the framework of the mental health services and counseling services in various medical and educational institutions (Toquero, 2021a, Toquero, 2021b; Toquero, 2021c). This poses both a challenge and an opportunity for healthcare providers, and particularly educational institutions, to establish inclusive practices, services, and facilities aimed at enhancing every learner's educational experiences while prioritizing their mental well-being as they are given justified treatment and accommodations that are developmentally appropriate to their needs.

4. Contributions and Recommendations

With the global status quo, a handful of policies and mandates are implemented concerning the urgent need to address inclusion in academic institutions, whereas further specifications and directions were ordered to continually enhance this educational reformation. These information were scrutinized in a broader

perspective, aimed at enlightening global, national, and local educational leaders. Basically, the implementation of such policies is deemed critical in schools, especially in classroom level in order to ensure that the provided mandates are efficiently applied and practiced. In this regard, teachers serve as catalyst toward this movement, thus they should be provided with opportunities to learn more about how to create successful inclusion within classrooms (Walsh, 2018).

In light of the following factors, it is recommended to (a) maintain sustainable inclusion policies and practices at the school and classroom level through training teachers and students; (b) strengthen the curriculum in tertiary education to prepare future educators; and (c) utilize online platforms to promote awareness and information dissemination through academic related activities and initiatives. To ensure direct interaction with the students, it is initially important to maintain and integrate sustainable inclusion policies and practices at the school and classroom levels. To ensure the accuracy of the information given to the students, educators should first be equipped with sufficient knowledge through trainings or seminar-workshops. Regarding the applicable teaching strategy, this could be achieved through various lesson discussions, while representations may be contextualized to their lesson and linked to personal experiences. It is equally important to gather the opinions and insights of the students in order to provide clarifications. Additionally, it is crucial to develop the knowledge of inclusive education among future teachers by incorporating inclusion into their curriculum. This would provide them with background information on the specific teaching methods and techniques they should use to deliver high-quality instruction, particularly to children with special needs. It is advantageous that they are prepared with knowledge and information on how to handle such learning environments before they engage the field. Another suggestion is to utilize online platforms as a means of disseminating information about academic-related events and inclusive education initiatives. Since the majority of students in the 21st century are technologically savvy, using digital and technology tools in knowledge-sharing processes may be advantageous. This will enable teachers to teach students about inclusive education while also requiring them to engage in activities involving the proper use of online resources. Information that is made available digitally hits a broader demographic globally, which may create opportunities for constructive exchanges of views about inclusive education.

5. Conclusion

Being seen as one of the most pressing global concerns, education is considered as an essential element towards building an inclusive society. Given the existing laws and regulations encouraging the implementation of inclusive education, its corresponding interventions may support in the preservation and attainment of a sustainable world that would ensure the provision of quality education. As a result, the governing bodies, school administration, teachers, staff, students, and parents should all collaborate to urgently address this concern with the goal to promote the growth of positive social ties and interactions. Inevitably, hurdles will arise, thus, plans and programs should be thoroughly developed, with constant monitoring to measure the success of such policies, which will then be appropriately handled to satisfy the demands of every individual involved. Albeit, these inclusive practices should be maintained in the hopes of creating learners who are keen to meaningfully participate towards societal progress and reformation.

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