

Engaging, Affirming, Nurturing Inclusive Environment: A Grounded Theory Study in the Philippine Context

Princess Zarla J. Raguindin
Far Eastern University
Philippines

Zhanina U. Custodio
Philippine Normal University
Philippines

Ferdinand Bulusan
Batanes State College
Philippines

Abstract

Implementing the tenets of inclusive education in different countries may be diverse because of varying interpretations, contexts, and ways of application. In the Philippines, studies that delve into the kind of environment involving Filipino children with special needs are scarce. Thus, through a grounded theory approach, this qualitative paper aims at developing a framework as a means of understanding inclusive environments thriving in an inclusive Philippine setting. Thirty-two special education teachers from three private schools were interviewed, the data being triangulated through class observations. The emerging theory encapsulated three major dimensions to understand concepts of inclusive environment: engaging environment, affirming environment, and nurturing environment. An engaging environment points to having high-standard learning outcomes, promoting collaboration and communication among learners, teachers, and parents, and involving them in decision-making. An affirming environment, on the other hand, denotes practicing expressive and receptive languages, imbibing the sacred worth of class members, and celebrating diversity. Finally, a nurturing environment can be achieved through interdependence and care for the needs of everyone. These dimensions are inter-related and are not standalone. This paper advances that success in the diversified Philippine inclusive classroom context can be achieved through the interdependence of school community members. The question of the significance of the inclusive practices and principles should not be the primary concern of a particular context. Rather, involvement and interdependence to achieve an engaging, affirming, and nurturing environment matter. Ramifications to micro and macro integration of inclusion that support inclusive environments are also discussed.

Keywords: inclusion in the Philippines, inclusive education, inclusive environment, inclusive pedagogy

Introduction

Inclusion has been a focus of several technical papers, as it enjoins educational systems to integrate the framework in their curricula, instruction, programs, and other capacity-building mechanisms (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2005). Inclusive education (IE) is implemented by states as a response to increasing heterogeneity in school communities. It is entrenched in providing similar classroom experiences for the diverse learners and further eliminates attitudes and values that seek to exclude and discriminate (UNESCO, 1994).

Policies create the context; however, schools make them happen (Winter & O’Raw, 2010). Hence, inclusion means more than the mere physical presence of learners with special education needs (SEN) in the inclusive classroom. A learner may thrive in an inclusive classroom, but can be excluded because of the attitude of those around him/her. A successful inclusion prompts an environment where the learner with SEN is treated as a full member or citizen of the school community (De Silva, 2013).

Inclusive education, may be seen as idealistic and unrealistic, yet it is achieved through mechanisms where presence, acceptance, participation, and achievement of all class members is valued. However, governments and nations face many challenges in achieving a just inclusive practice because of variations on how countries interpret and implement inclusion. For example, in the Southeast Asian context, there is a paucity of research on approaches for the participation of children with special needs (CSN) in the general education setting (Hosshan et al., 2019). In the same way, the kind of environment where Filipino children with special needs are involved is not explicitly addressed in the existing literature.

To narrow the chasm between theory and practice, there is a need to revisit and re-evaluate the inclusive environments. Through a grounded theory approach, this paper documents the inclusive environments offered to Filipino learners with SEN. An interview with teachers handling inclusive classes and classroom observation of classes with children with disabilities (Autism and ADHD from Nursery to Grade 6) were conducted to gather data to address the research questions. Insights from this study will summarize a model for how school communities can provide and strengthen inclusive environments for diverse learners.

Literature Review

The Inclusive Agenda

As an educational agenda, inclusive education was institutionalized in response to the needs of diverse learners with particular emphasis on those with perceived difference (UNESCO, 1994). The school community should be a context where the learners’ presence, participation, and collaboration are the top priority (Sharma & Sokal, 2015). Baglieri and Shapiro (2017) similarly claimed that IE enables children to be valued, to be considered in inclusive learning, and to be encouraged toward purposeful participation in the classroom. The policy stemmed from the mandate which asserts that quality education is a basic human right (United Nations, 1948). Through the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), government signatories adopted the framework of action and implemented IE in their own context. Inclusive education necessitated a fundamental shift in infrastructure, systems and structures, and state-wide school curricula (UNESCO, 1994). On a larger scale, IE has challenged cultures and values that continue to marginalize. In the school context, it has altered the landscape of curriculum, pedagogy, teachers’ training and preparation, other delivery modes, and cultures.

Some researchers believe that IE is idealistic and unrealistic. For instance, Florian (1998) and Hornby (2014, p. 2) claimed that achieving IE is a struggle, while the latter argued that IE is “theoretically unsound and practically impossible.” Nonetheless, Florian (1998) explained that the full inclusion of learners with SEN could be possible in the long run. The success of inclusion is a gargantuan task that entails the cooperation of stakeholders, especially those in the classroom. Inclusive approaches happen through the transformation of school cultures, where the learners with SEN become full members of the school community.

Inclusive Education in the Philippine Context

Philippines is a signatory of international inclusive education policies, but despite these milestones in the practice of IE, Mori (2015) argued that a significant number of Filipino learners were not able to go to school because of either financial challenge faced by households or lack of access to educational facilities. School buildings, roads and transport systems in the Philippines are generally not person with disability [PWD]-friendly, especially for the mobility-impaired (Reyes, 2014). In the National Disability Prevalence Survey (NDPS) conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) in 2016, around 10,000 individuals were classified as disabled, with different levels of disability nationwide (Technical Education and Skills Development Authority [TESDA], 2020). Women and children with disabilities were found to have lower literacy and school participation rates, and generally have lower educational attainment, than males with disabilities (Reyes, 2014). With this data, it could be reputed that the country needs to improve on creating less restrictive environments for people with disability.

Policies are heading toward inclusion of learners with SEN in the educational system. The Republic Act 10533 or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 implements programs designed to address diverse learners, including those with disabilities. In fact, the implementation of IE is at the core principle of the K to 12 basic education programs. The ordinance mandates schools to deliver inclusive, quality, relevant, and accessible education to over 22 million Filipino learners (Albert, 2016). Of these students, 308,321 are learners with special needs being accommodated by 448 recognized Special Education (SpEd) centers and 173 regular schools with SpEd classes (Department of Education, 2015). However, government funded schools in the country, where most Filipino children are enrolled, are challenged with poor outcome quality, large class sizes, teacher shortage, dearth in resources, unsustainable curriculum, and contradicting perspective of lawmakers (Alegado, 2018). The country subsequently struggles in the implementation of IE due to compounded misconceptions on what IE is about, inadequate resources, knowledge and self-preparation of teachers (Muega, 2016).

To ensure excellent delivery of the inclusive agenda, intensive training on inclusive pedagogies has been organized with the aim of helping teachers effectively meet the needs of learners with SEN (DepEd, 2015), but Mina and Agbon (2017) claim that school participation among learners with SEN is generally low. Initiatives toward the attainment of IE are undertaken; however, Villamero and Kamenopoulou (2014) argue that in a country where resources are a huge challenge, IE becomes a difficult effort. In a country where resources are scarce, promoting welcoming and affirming practices is a viable option toward achieving the goal of the inclusion agenda.

An Inclusive Environment for the Diverse Learners

Inclusion is fundamentally a question of ethos and attitude. IE is not just a matter of policy and program implementation, but it also has an emotional aspect which involves the whole

community (Florian, 1998). Florian's claim (1998) is affirmed by Baglieri and Shapiro (2017) as the authors posited the need to reshape attitudes and social arrangements for effective inclusion. The environment should be a facilitator of acceptance, belongingness, and camaraderie (Vuorinen et al., 2018). However, as with the complexities that constitute inclusion, challenges and disagreements remain.

Avramidis (2010) described a positive situation in terms of the participation of learners with SEN in the inclusive classroom. Among the students with Intellectual Developmental Delay (IDD), findings from a large number of research studies show a positive effect of inclusion which include: higher expectations for student learning (Jorgensen et al., 2007); improved communication and social skills (Beukelman et al., 2013); and better academic outcomes (Cosier et al., 2013). Despite these studies, many findings contradicted this notion and forced reassessment of this widely held belief. Kennedy (2018) and Valenzuela-Zambrano et al. (2016) opined that learners with SEN are often the subject of ridicule, bullying, and belittling of their typically developing peers. Consequently, they face problems in terms of social participation (Bossaert et al., 2011). Vuorinen et al., (2018) also claimed that finding friends is a struggle for those with a perceived difference. Studies above may have contradictory notions on inclusion, but such contradictions only show that environment plays a vital role in the development of learners with SEN.

The school communities' failure to promote inclusive philosophies and uphold inclusive practices can be attributed to values and cultures that seek to exclude (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). Behavioral, social, and emotional patterns arising in the inclusive classroom are among the most challenging dimensions in achieving the inclusive goals (Raguindin, 2020). To hurdle this predicament, a transformational notion of inclusion should be instituted (De Silva, 2013). A common feature of a transformative inclusive practice is providing a shared space where all learners can thrive. For example, these can be learning environments that promote collaboration, interaction, positive peer relationship, and support toward school success (De Silva, 2013). There is a need to challenge traditional cultures, remove biases, and replace potential barriers that impede belongingness and participation.

IE is cogent in this statement – active involvement of each member in an inclusive classroom. It implies different levels of being part of a learning environment, from being informed, being consulted, taking part, and producing output. A quintessential inclusion is a context where belongingness, participation, and engagement of diverse perspective, background, and ability is valued, embraced, and celebrated. Through a grounded theory approach, this paper sought to develop a framework as a means of understanding inclusive environments thriving in an inclusive setting.

Methodology

Design

The context of this paper necessarily calls for an emerging theory to explain the phenomenon under study. Hence, this paper is inspired by constructivist grounded theory because it allowed the researchers to follow the lead of the data and trace what happened at any point in the research process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hallberg, 2006; Wertz et al., 2011). Data tracking employed in a constructivist grounded theory is facilitatively done through encoding and categorizing along the way (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, collection and analysis of data by employing constant comparison methods occurred in the process. The researchers also enriched simultaneous data collection and analysis by memo-writing to construct

conceptual analyses, and theoretical sampling to refine the researchers' emerging theoretical ideas. Moreover, the use of constructivist grounded theory enabled the exploration of the factors and their implications for the research. This approach was deemed appropriate because flexibility in data collection was obtained.

Through the use of this strategy, nuances in the interpretation of meaning were basically influenced by the accentuation of social context from which the data was extracted (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). It, therefore, allowed a reciprocal relationship between the researchers and participants (Chong & Yeo, 2015), and situated the researchers as contributors in the data construction (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2019). In this way, the design of this study foregrounded the tenets of constructivist idea that knowledge is constructed by interaction (Crotty, 1998).

Data Source and Collection

The data yielded from this study were initially drawn from accounts of participants from three private elementary schools. A semi-structured, open-ended interview was conducted to gather insights from purposively selected informants (profile is shown in Table 1). The interview approximately lasted for 30-40 minutes. The interview was audiotaped and transcribed.

Table 1. Profile of Participants (N=32)

Demographics		n
Educational Attainment		
	Master's Degree	25
	Bachelor	7
	Total	32
Years in the Profession		
	0-3 years	7
	4-7 years	9
	8 – 11 years	10
	12 and above	4
	Total	32
Position/ Classes assigned		
	SpEd Coordinator	5
	Adviser (Preschool)	4
	Adviser (Grade 1)	5
	Adviser (Grade 4)	7
	Adviser (Grade 5)	4
	Adviser (Grade 6)	6
	Subject Teacher	1
	Total	32

To facilitate iteration and constant comparative analysis, another set of interviews was conducted from selected informants from the previous pool for a more in-depth conversation. Additionally, the researchers conducted a series of class observations where the participants are teaching (Table 2). The simultaneous interview and observation allowed the researchers to reinforce theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling facilitates the saturation of data needed to establish theories relating to the phenomena under study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). The data collection was carried on until well-defined and refined data were finally saturated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).

Table 2. Profile of the classrooms observed

Classroom Number	Grade Level	Total Number of Pupils	Number of observations	Number of CSN in the class/ Exceptionality
C1	Nursery	M = 6 , F = 5	1	1/ Autism/ADHD
C2	Kindergarten	M = 8 , F = 7	1	1 /Autism)
C3	Grade 4	M= 4 , F = 5	1	1/ Autism
C4	Grade 4	M= 12 , F = 14	1	1/ Autism and ADHD
C5	Grade 6	M = 10 , F = 12	1	1/ Autism

Note: M = Male, F = Female

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the authors applied credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability measures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was ensured as the researchers utilized the appropriate methods in collecting data and in selecting participants as key informants. Further, the transcribed interviews were returned to the informants for member check (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to increase the credibility of the data gathered. Meanwhile, the dependability of the data was ensured as the researchers conducted a series of observations and informal conversations (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). The iteration reinforced the accuracy of the data gathered. Third, confirmability was reinforced by involving external researchers to validate the codes and categories generated from the data (Burnard, 1991; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Finally, the transferability of the study is prompted as the researchers outlined components like data collection methods, data participants, and means of data analysis. Thus, it can support other researchers to determine if there is transferability of the data gathered and the theory generated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

A permit to conduct the study was secured from the gatekeepers before the researchers commenced the data gathering (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Further, consent to take part in the study was secured to establish a clear relationship between the participants and the researcher. The consent also emphasized confidentiality and privacy in handling the data gathered.

Data Analysis

The theory generated from this study was yielded through analytical induction and constant comparison of qualitative data gathered (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researchers utilized line-by-line coding as a preliminary analysis (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). The preliminary codes from the memo-writing (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014) were used to determine additional data needed to ensure that categories are well-defined, and data saturation is reached (Chong & Yeo, 2015). During the simultaneous data collection, a focused coding was conducted (Wertz et al., 2011) to bridge the initial codes and the newly gathered data. The partial codes and categories were refined through “memo sorting” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014, p. 167). Sorting the written memo allowed a comprehensive constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). As the relationship between the codes, categories, and sub-categories was juxtaposed, the theories from the phenomenon studied were illuminated (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). The generated theory was validated through comparison with literature (Chong & Yeo, 2015). The researchers made use of MAXQDA in the data analysis.

Findings

Following the tenets of a constructivist grounded theory approach, an interrelated set of dimensions that formed an emerging theory for understanding concepts of inclusive environment has surfaced in this study. Openness, flexibility, and constant comparison of extracted data from various sources yielded the following dimensions: engaging environment, affirming environment, and nurturing environment (Figure.1). Under each dimension are some qualifying descriptions that necessitate the existence of each environment to make up a macro-contextual inclusive milieu.

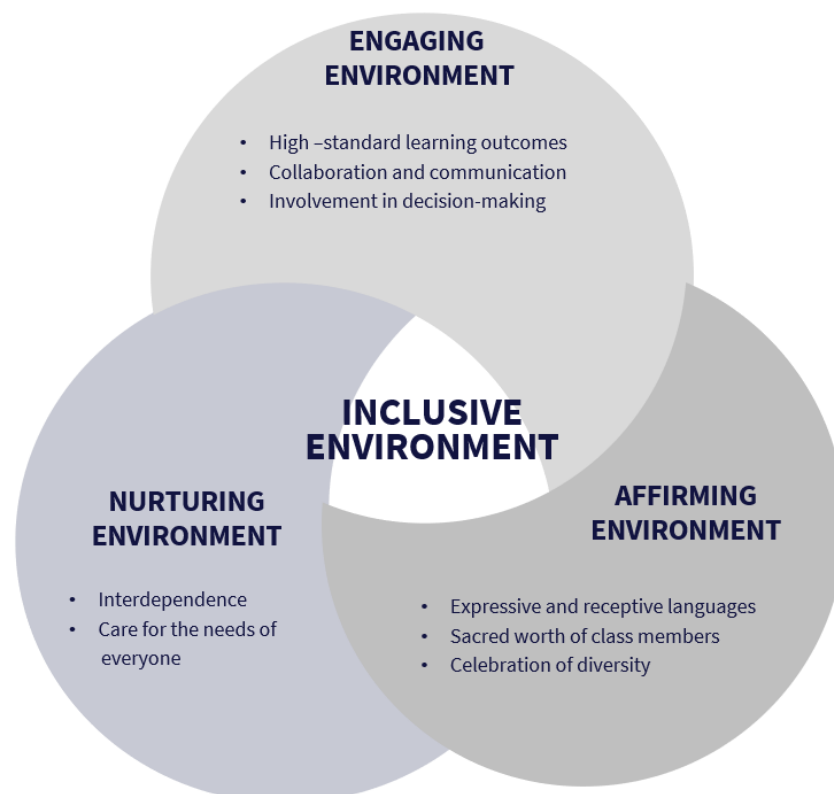


Figure 1: Model of the emergent theory of an inclusive environment

An Engaging Environment

Shreds of evidence from the data gathered construed notions that an engaging environment is consequential in implementing inclusive approaches. The participants believe that emphasis on high-standard learning outcomes, collaboration and communication, and participative decision-making are essential components to ensure that the schools achieve the inclusive goals by providing an engaging environment.

High-standard learning outcomes. The participants believe that learners with SEN and the entire class should be engaged in the teaching-learning process. For example, the participants emphasized that the multi-domain needs of the learners with SEN, as stipulated in their individualized educational plans (IEP), should be achieved. Task analysis is done to make the academic responsibility of the learners become more manageable and attainable.

It is my task as the class adviser to remind the CSN of tasks for the day. I do it on a daily basis so it will not be overwhelming for the child and it will be

easier to digest. [...] not just to get the perfect score, but to finish the task (P1).

When I give modified worksheet, parents would ask me why it is different. [...] I communicate the task to the child that in order to finish the task she should cooperate with me and knows that she needs extra help from the teacher (P14).

The core of the inclusive agenda is to allow the learners with SEN to reach their potential and experience success. This inclusive environment compels teachers to actively take part in implementing inclusion no matter how tasking it is. Implementing IEP is already a multi-layered task, let alone other needs that go beyond what is outlined in the IEP.

Collaboration and communication. To promote an engaging environment, the research participants emphasized the vital role of significant others working with the learners with SEN. Hence, to reach the common goal of the inclusive classroom, engagement of the learners with SEN, is a collective effort which necessitates parents, teachers, and peers as collaborators.

I communicate with other teachers, and the rest of the class to make sure that we champion for the CSN. We keep close communication with parents. They are hesitant to involve their CSN in programs and other academic matters. But I remind them that we work together for the success of their child (P26).

Working in constant collaboration and communication with other teachers allows a series of best practices to provide an engaging environment for the diverse class consistently. While there is scarcity in materials, the participants share their best practices for more efficient delivery of their tasks, as evident in the following quotes:

*Part of our routine is to gather and plan for effective strategies (P8).
I made it a part of my schedule to be in consultation with other teachers to be guided as to how to provide rich experiences for the CSN in our class (P4).*

Involvement in decision-making. Involving the CSN in the decision-making process that affects their lives, including academic endeavor, encourages and facilitates their full involvement in the diverse school community. The participants in the study attest to this:

To challenge the CSN in my class, I would make her decide how much work she has to do. I will not require her to work on three items only. I leave the decision to her. But, I supervise and make sure the child is still working on her task (P22).

The participation of the learners with SEN in decision-making to reach their academic goals extends even in peer-support arrangements (for example, groupings during collaborative activities), individual work, and other processes. Peers are encouraged to provide significant support to their classmates with special educational needs. The typically developing peers know that they work alongside the CSN within their group to achieve common goals. These insights are evident in the following statements.

I partner (CSN) with peers who are mindful of their classmate (CSN) (P3).

I assign a responsible pupil to be my little teacher. [...] classmate works as shadow teacher to the CSN. [...] I love doing this because the CSN accomplishes much while the little teacher becomes more focused and responsible as well (P10).

To sum, the data exhibited an engaging community for the diverse learners through the principles, strategies and partnership employed to help the CSN achieve their goals alongside institutional goals.

An Affirming Environment

The best facilitator of school success is the recognition of the potential of each learner. An exemplary affirming environment is a context where everyone is equally valued. This study implies that the learners with SEN are given opportunities for expressive and receptive expressions, the sacredness of each class member is honored, and diversity is aggressively pursued and celebrated.

Expressive and receptive languages. The data yielded pieces of evidence of raising cultures by which language is used to affirm the involvement of learners with SEN.

I make sure that they have the chance to discuss and answer questions. [...]I would start calling the CSN's classmates, then ask the CSN to repeat the answer. Then, the group will know that the CSN participated in class (P16).

Sometimes, the CSN in my classroom is not ready to answer my questions [...] I would modify the level of difficulty of my questions. When I ask the class to spell the word, metamorphosis I would ask the CSN to spell the word fruit. And I can really see the sense of accomplishment in them (P21).

Accounts with which the CSN in the inclusive classroom are sometimes intimidated and left behind in terms of expressing their thoughts and ideas in a distinct form, were elucidated by the participants.

During discussion, there are instances when the CSN would start to withdraw, especially when they see their peers contributing a lot. That is when the CSN is silent (P17)

It is sometimes risky to involve the CSN. I have this experience in my class when the CSN was so much frustrated and started to shout and cry. Then, kicked the trash bin, and it landed on another classmate. I heard some classmates said, "let us transfer him to another section because of his behavior (P30).

These accounts explain why the class withdraws communication with the classmate with special needs for several reasons: (a) the CSN throws tantrums during deep frustrations, (b) they do not perform like their non-disabled peers all the time. There are factors that create an unfavorable environment for the CSN like intimidation and difficulty to process emotions, which can be directly attributed to their exceptionality. Data also showed that bullying, demeaning, and threatening do not flourish in their classrooms. There are no accounts where

language is used as a weapon of assault. However, learners in the standardized curriculum might distance themselves from classmates in the inclusive curriculum.

The sacred worth of class members. Another means of affirming the diversity in the inclusive approach is valuing the sacredness of each class member. School communities must pursue a fair community. Hence, learners with SEN should be regarded as members of the school communities who can attain their fullest potential.

Participants agreed that inclusive education is a challenging task. The burden of providing scaffolding for the learners in the standardized curriculum and inclusive curriculum significantly rests on the teachers. Thus, internalizing the goal of inclusive education, which is to provide success for all learners from a diverse group, is very important and should be given utmost consideration.

I would set up the physical environment in such way they everyone has something to do especially during free time (time to go around the learning centers). When the shadow teacher is not present, I do one-on-one approach to support the CSN [...] I would assign “little teachers” to help their classmate (CSN). The CSN is provided with the much needed support (P9).

One time, we had this inter-school intramural. I made an arrangement with other coaches to put into the game those CSN from our teams. We had to do this so they will also succeed in several co-curricular activities without being intimidated. Their teammates agreed. They did perform well in the game. In fact, they were cheered the most (P3).

Although interviewees shared an ideal experience, pieces of evidence from the observation conducted showed that Pupil 3 exhibited significant difficulty in accomplishing the paperwork. Pupil 3 is in full inclusion and does not have a shadow teacher. The teacher checks on the CSN, but no scaffolding is done. Also, no clear directions are given on how to proceed with the worksheet. During the entire course of working on the worksheet, the CSN just stared at his paper and even had an episode of suddenly screaming. According to the Coordinator (P8), the child is new in the school. They attribute the misbehavior to the apparent lack of guidance provided in his past school, and he had difficulty following classroom routines implemented by the new school environment.

An affirming environment ends not only with tolerance. Tolerance on how the CSN performs in the class every day because of what she/he can do and cannot do is not enough. There existed some documented misgivings in the involvement of the CSN in the inclusive classrooms. At the moment, this tolerance may not be enough, but it is a good starting point of a high-quality inclusive education practice, especially in the context of a developing country.

Celebration of diversity. Finally, an affirming environment is a community that pursues and celebrates diversity. The most cogent means of achieving an affirming environment is integrating diversity at the core of the schools’ philosophy, vision, and mission statements. The participating schools affirmed the sacred worth and human dignity of each learner as enshrined in their philosophy and undertakings. The class members are valued and equally treated.

We believe that this is our ministry. We want to extend help to everyone, including those with special needs. We want our students to be part in promoting what we believe as Jesus' ministry to children (P7).

We would have annual social activities. This is the time where we showcase the talents and potential of our students. The CSN in the class become part of the activity. Every year we witness how our school celebrates diversity. In this way, we tell our students and their families that everyone matters (P31).

Communities are being re-created through rituals and unique traditions. The schools visited for the data gathering continue with their rich traditions as they fuse innovations brought about by the increasing diversity in the school community. The CSN is brought into a celebrative community as they are catered for in a circle where opportunities for connections and participation are reinforced. These opportunities are facilitated through culminating activities, classroom programs, intramural, annual gatherings, and many more.

A Nurturing Environment

Prioritizing the well-being of class members in the pluralistic school community and caring for their needs is pivotal in a nurturing environment. An inclusive community can be engaging and affirming, but the nurturing and caring gestures expressed and extended hold these values intact.

Interdependence. CSN is involved in a supportive and collaborative class, where inter-relatedness and inter-connectedness occur. Children and youth with disabilities experience significant difficulties in developing independence in their social life. However, with the school communities being sensitive in providing scaffolding and valuable opportunities for the CSN, they powerfully champion for the CSN.

Children have different perceptions of the CSN in their class. They ask questions like, "Why is our classmate slow?" Why is our classmate making that sound?". I would tell them that their classmate is not yet ready to talk. "Maybe they just want to have friends with you" I would reply (P21).

Some children also share experiences with their parents. Then, parents start to question "why do you have such classmates, and why is he like that". Then, their classmates would tell their parents, "Mommy, because he has difficulty talking (P22).

Support comes in many forms. The most important type of support to facilitate the involvement of the CSN are children supporting children, teachers supporting teachers, parents supporting their children, and communities supporting their schools (UNESCO, 2016).

Care for the needs of everyone. While children are still focused on reaching individual accomplishments in the class, they exhibit awareness of others' needs and presence as well. For instance, the observation conducted showed how the classmates of the learner from C1 become sensitive to their classmate's needs.

In an inclusive setting, you will have to choose whom to leave, especially with matters of classroom management. When I have to

attend to the CSN in my class who suddenly throw tantrums, their peers would automatically keep silent and are behaved. They know we have to help their classmate in such episodes. Even parents would tell them as well. Everyone becomes an advocate (P11).

Inclusive education practices become quintessential when they create strong and meaningful connectedness and belongingness in a community. The school community should view inclusive cultures like high-standard learning outcomes, collaboration and communication, involvement in decision-making, opportunities for receptive and expressive languages, sacred worth of each member, celebration of diversity, interdependence, and caring for the needs of other not as secondary to the implementation of the school curriculum but a central part of it.

Discussion

The findings of this paper advance an assertion of an inclusive nurturing, engaging, and affirming environment. In the parlance of inclusive approach, vital inclusive community is one that inspires shared spaces. The growing diversity in every classroom today should ensure an environment that shall facilitate, sustain, and uphold essential qualities of an inclusive classroom (UNESCO, 2017).

Comparison with Previous Studies

This paper provided some evidence for the results of previous studies. The core dimension of an inclusive environment that has emerged from the study has been repeatedly proposed by several research, position papers, and international policies.

Themes like acceptance, presence, and participation are at the core of every initiative about inclusion (UNESCO, 2017). The findings of this paper reiterate the strong call of UNESCO to alter cultures of exclusion and marginalization in the school communities. There will always be exclusionary themes that will arise in the school communities (UNESCO, 2017), thus, a constant appeal to educational systems to make inclusion a substantive concern.

The findings of this paper likewise accorded importance in co-opting learners as co-implementers of the inclusive agenda. Despite the wealth of literature available in the field, there is a lack of investigation on how children can be active implementers of IE (Raguindin & Ping, 2020). Including all children in the inclusive agenda expands the experiences of all. Jorgensen et al. (2007), for example, gave evidence to higher expectations for student learning as a positive effect of inclusion. The school community should view inclusive cultures like nurture, acceptance, tolerance, and empathy not as secondary to implementing the school curriculum but are a central part of it (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017).

The study also corroborates the important role of teachers as main implementers of the inclusive agenda. It further affirms the importance of pedagogical decisions teachers have to make and implement steps toward a more inclusive classroom. The teachers' multi-layered and complex role in the inclusive agenda necessitates them to acquire inclusive philosophies and implement inclusive pedagogies (Raguindin et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2018).

On a micro aspect, the previous study of Custodio (2019) claimed that Filipino teachers have knowledge on the principles of IE, but they implement placement of learners with SEN based on certain standards that appear to be exclusive. This practice reflects a barrier to participation

and achievement of learners with SEN. On the contrary, this paper supported findings that a functional inclusive environment can thrive in a diverse classroom in the Philippine setting.

New Knowledge Generated

This study warrants a better understanding of the interconnectedness of three important themes which are vital in building inclusive environment. This paper argues that an engaging, affirming, and nurturing environment is a place where learning is pervasive. Despite the contested definition of inclusion, through the model, we assert that it should be implemented in the context of belongingness and collective journey of all members of the school community.

Moving towards inclusivity is believing that all children can learn, and all children can engage in learning with rigor. It also means that all children can learn, grow, and benefit from a wide array of experiences and ideas that may be offered in the academic (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017) and social setting (Martínez & Porter, 2020). Thus, it compels educational institution to innovate strategies for inclusive pedagogies such as forging high-standard learning outcomes, collaborating and communicating with all stakeholders, and placing all learners on top of their academic journeys. Like their typically developing peers, learners with SEN have their needs and thinking preferences that necessitate quality, interactive, and engaging instructional environment (Liasidou, 2015).

The model also highlights the importance of an atmosphere where plurality is affirmed, and heterogeneity is celebrated. Success in the inclusive classroom is not the struggle of learners with SEN alone, but it is also the responsibility of their peers, teachers, the entire school community, and even their families (De Silva, 2013). Rendering the concept of inclusion is understanding the role of the society to denounce collectively values and cultures that seek to exclude and marginalize. Upholding inclusionary themes like being sensitive to expressive and receptive languages, respecting the sacred worth of the class members, and celebrating diversity is a powerful means of combating discrimination.

The realization of interdependence and care for the needs of everyone is also a common theme in practicing IE. In a nurturing environment, the issue of access, equity, equality of support, resources, and opportunity is a normative part of the school culture (UNESCO, 2016). In a context where diversity is substantial and belongingness can be tenuous, it is primarily the concern of inclusive education to bring to the school community practices that shall promote an engaging, affirming, and nurturing environment for the sake of all learners.

The context discussed in this paper catalyzes the foundation on which a vital community of learning is formed, a context where the educational experience of all learners is extended. A school that is neatly based on an inclusive and cooperative structure utilizes the capacity of all members of the community and creates possibilities of stimulation and enrichment. When this is realized by the community, it will facilitate learning, encourage positive attitudes, and explore ways of doing things (UNESCO, 2016). This will subsequently yield all learners, regardless of perceived difference, to have a better chance of joining in the structures and processes taking place in their communities and societies.

Conclusion

Although a necessity for a wide-scale participation of schools to firm up the emerged theory should exist, this paper only observed from classes with children with disabilities. It did not seek to cover other components of inclusion like cultural, gender, language, and socio-

economic differences. Furthermore, this work is also limited by its consideration of urban context and did not tend to investigate phenomena that arise in inclusive classrooms in the rural context.

As inclusive education is based on values and principles, the question whether it will work is insignificant. We should rather argue more on how to make it happen. One factor that will make inclusive education palatable is by ensuring genuine involvement of the learners with SEN in the classroom “as exclusion remains a real and present danger” (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015, p. 896). It is said that pluralism is a social practice while diversity is a curricular practice (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017), hence, a strong directive for educational institutions to undergo fundamental shift towards “education for all”.

Inclusive education strives toward the pedagogies that support each member in the community to perceive themselves as capable of achieving in the path of learning. This will eventually facilitate meaningful participation in their community (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). This research is a step towards a more profound understanding of an inclusive environment, thus, forward the following recommendations. First, involvement has a profound effect in the capacity of the CSN to participate and succeed in accessing the school curriculum. Schools practicing inclusion should ensure the full involvement and sustain as well as strengthen the participation of learners through effective and relevant pedagogies. Second, the entire school community should be prepared to extend adequately their repertoire of capacities to respond effectively to the heterogeneity of the school population. Specifically, teachers, who directly deal with every learner in the inclusive classroom, should be provided with enabling mechanisms to internalize inclusive philosophies and implement inclusive approaches to the building of a community of learners. Third, schools should promote a strong sense of community and positive expectations for the learners with SEN to become active class members through their enabling policies, pro-active student support, meaningful parental involvement, holistic and relevant curriculum, and instructional practices. Finally, as inclusion should be a national agenda, there is a need to craft initiatives and policies that shall encourage and support inclusive environments.

References

- Ahmed, M., Sharma, U., & Deppeler, J. (2014). Variables affecting teachers' intentions to include students with disabilities in regular primary schools in Bangladesh. *Disability & Society*, 29(2), 317–331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2013.796878>
- Albert, J. (2016). *What do statistics say about basic education in the Philippines* (No. 2016–19). Phillipine Institute for Development Studies. <http://hdl.handle.net/11540/6837>
- Alegado, P. J. (2018). The challenges of teacher leadership in the Philippines as experienced and perceived by teachers. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 6(6), 291–302.
- Avramidis, E. (2010). Social relationships of pupils with special educational needs in the mainstream primary class: Peer group membership and peer-assessed social behaviour. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 25, 413–429. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2010.513550>
- Baglieri, S., & Shapiro, A. (2017). *Disability studies and the inclusive classroom. Critical practices for embracing diversity in education* (2nd Ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315642543>
- Beukelman, D. R., Mirenda, P., & Beukelman, D. R. (2013). *Augmentative and alternative communication : supporting children and adults with complex communication needs* (4th Ed.). Brookes Publishing
- Bossaert, G., Colpin, H., Pijl, S., & Petry, K. (2013). Truly included? A literature study focusing on the social dimension of inclusion in education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(1), 60–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2011.580464>
- Burnard, P. (1991). A method of analysing interview transcripts in qualitative research. *Nurse Education Today*, 11(6), 461–466. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-6917\(91\)90009-Y](https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-6917(91)90009-Y)
- Chong, C., & Yeo, K. (2015). An overview of grounded theory design in educational research. *Asian Social Science*, 11(12), 258–268. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v11n12p258>
- Cosier, M., Causton-Theoharis, J., & Theoharis, G. (2013). Does access matter? Time in general education and achievement for students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 34(6), 323–332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932513485448>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. SAGE Publications.
- Custodio, Z. (2019). *A mentoring model for student teachers in inclusive schools* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of the Philippines).
- De Silva, N. (2013). Inclusive pedagogy in light of social justice. Special educational rights and inclusive classrooms: on whose terms? A field study in Stockholm suburbs. *European Journal of Education*, 48(3), 419–435. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12032>
- Department of Education (2015). *Guidelines for the utilization of support funds for the special education (SpEd) program*.
- Florian, L., & Spratt, J. (2013). Enacting inclusion: A framework for interrogating inclusive practice. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 28(2), 119–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2013.778111>

- Florian, Lani. (1998). *Promoting inclusive practice*. Routledge Falmer.
- Forlin, C. (2010). *Teacher Education for inclusion. Changing paradigms and innovative approaches*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203850879>
- Forlin, C., Loreman, T., & Sharma, U. (2014). A system-wide professional learning approach about inclusion for teachers in Hong Kong. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(3), 247–260. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2014.906564>
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory. Strategies for qualitative research*. Transaction Publishers.
- Graneheim, U. H., & Lundman, B. (2004). Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: concepts, procedures and measure to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today*, 24(2), 105–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2003.10.001>
- Hallberg, L. (2006). The “core category” of grounded theory: Making constant comparisons. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 1(3), 141–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482620600858399>
- Hardy, I., & Woodcock, S. (2015). Inclusive education policies: Discourses of difference, diversity, and deficit. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19(2), 141–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.908965>
- Hornby, G. (2014). Inclusive special education: The need for a new theory. In G. Hornby, *Inclusive special education: Evidence-based practices for children with special needs and disabilities* (pp. 1–18). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-1483-8_1
- Hosshan, H., Stancliffe, R., Villeneuve, M., & Bonati, M. (2019). Inclusive schooling in Southeast Asian countries: A scoping review of the literature. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 21, 99–119. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-019-09613-0>
- Jorgensen, C. M., McSheehan, M., & Sonnenmeier, R. M. (2007). Presumed competence reflected in the educational programs of students with IDD before and after the Beyond Access professional development intervention. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, 32(4), 248–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668250701704238>
- Karpouza, E., & Emvalotis, A. (2019). Exploring the teacher-student relationship in graduate education: a constructivist grounded theory. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 24(2), 121–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1468319>
- Kennedy, A. (2018). Promoting the social competence of each and every child in inclusive early childhood classrooms. In D. Farland-Smith (Ed.), *Early childhood education*. InTech Open. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.80858>
- Liasidou, A. (2015). *Inclusive education and the issue of change: Theory, policy and pedagogy*. Palgrave. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137333704>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. S. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Martínez, Y. M., & Porter, G. L. (2020). Planning for all students: promoting inclusive instruction. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(14), 1552–1567. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1544301>
- Mina, C. D., & Agbon, A. (2017). *School participation of children with disability: The case of San Remigio and Madaue City, Cebu, Philippines*. Discussion papers DP 2017-59, Philippine Institute for Development Studies.

- Muega, M. (2016). Inclusive education in the Philippines: Through the eyes of teachers, administrators, and parents of children with special needs. *Social Science Diliman*, 12(5), 5–28.
- Raguindin, P. Z. J. (2020). Integrating concepts and expressions of inclusion in the K – Curriculum: The case of the Philippines. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 9(1), 305–317. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.9.1.305>
- Raguindin, P. Z. J., & Ping, L. Y. (2020). Situating “children-supporting-children” platform in the context of the inclusive agenda: A phenomenological exploration. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 19(6), 303–322. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.19.6.18>
- Raguindin, P. Z. J., Ping, L. Y., Duereh, F., & Lising, R. L. (2020). Inclusive practices of in-service teachers: A quantitative exploration of a Southeast Asian context. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 9(2), 787–797. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.9.2.787>
- Reyes, C. (2014). Education: Access of PWDs. In S. Mori, C. Reyes, & T. Yamagata (Eds.), *Poverty reduction of the disabled* (p. 208). Routledge.
- Sharma, U., Aiello, P., Pace, E., Round, P., & Subban, P. (2018). In-service teachers’ attitudes, concerns, efficacy and intentions to teach in inclusive classrooms: an international comparison of Australian and Italian teachers. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 33(3), 437–446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1361139>
- Sharma, U., & Sokal, L. (2015). The impact of a teacher education course on pre-service teachers’ beliefs about inclusion: An international comparison. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 15(4), 276–284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12043>
- Technical Education and Skills Development Authority. (2020). *Enabling the disabled: Social equity for all*. Technical Education and Skills Development Authority.
- Thornberg, K., & Charmaz, K. (2014). Grounded theory and theoretical coding. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis* (pp. 153–169). SAGE Publications Inc. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243.n11>
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (1994). *The Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education*. UNESCO/Ministry of Education and Science.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2005). *Guidelines for inclusion: Ensuring access to education for all*. UNESCO
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2016). *Training tools for curriculum development. Reaching out to all learners: A resource pack for supporting inclusive education*. UNESCO
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2017). *A guide for ensuring inclusion and equality in education*. UNESCO
- United Nations. (1948). *The universal declaration of human rights, 1948-1998*. United Nations Department. of Information.
- Valenzuela-Zambrano, B., Chacon-Lopez, H., Lopez-Justica, M. D., & Panoa-Ramalho, A. (2016). Self-concept of Chilean and Portuguese university students with disabilities: Gender and participation in support programmes. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 5(4), 213–222. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.5.4.213>

- Villamero, R. J., & Kamenopoulou, L. (2014). Teachers' assessment for children with disabilities: a constructivist study in mainstream primary schools in Negros Oriental, Philippines. In L. Kamenopoulou (Ed.), *Inclusive education and disability in the Global South* (pp. 83–108). Springer International Publishing.
- Vuorinen, K., Erikivi, A., Malmivaara, L. (2018). A character strength intervention in 11 inclusive Finnish classrooms to promote social participation of students with special educational needs. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 19(1), 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12423>
- Wertz, F., Charmaz, K., McMullen, L., Jossellson, R., Anderson, R., & McSpadden, E. (2011). *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis. Phenomenological psychology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research, and intuitive inquiry*. The Guilford Press.
- Winter, E., & O'Raw, P. (2010). *Literature review of the principles and practices relating to inclusive education for children with special educational needs*. NCSE.

Corresponding author: Princess Zarla Raguindin

Email: natin81@gmail.com