

Listening to Elementary Teachers' Voices in an Inclusive Classroom: A Retrospect of their Experiences

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Abstract:- This study explored the lived experiences, challenges encountered, coping mechanisms and insights of public elementary teachers in implementing inclusive education in schools. The participants were coming from DepEd Region XI, Division of Davao City, specifically in the schools of Bunawan District. There were ten (10) teachers who participated in the study. This study made use of a phenomenological approach to extract the ideas from the participants. The participants were purposely selected as representatives from the group of elementary school teachers in the same district. The virtual in-depth interview was employed to gather significant information with regard to their respective lived experiences. Using the thematic analysis, the following themes emerged pertaining to their lived experiences: equity amidst inclusivity, challenged but competent teachers, considering learners' improved social skills and hurdling mainstreaming issues. Further, there were three (3) subthemes identified on the hurdling mainstreaming issues as the challenges encountered by the participants, these are lack of formal training for teachers, lack of parental support and the lack of facilities. The coping mechanisms of teacher participants on the challenges they experienced were: teachers' training program for mainstreaming classes, cultivating patience as teachers, and teacher-parent partnerships. The educational management insights drawn from the participants were understanding the beauty of learners' diversity and the importance of a supportive school environment. Thus, The DepEd administrators and heads may craft teacher enhancement programs through face-to-face training or through webinars focusing on handling inclusive classes and implementing instructions in schools.

Keywords:- *Inclusive Education, Mainstreaming, Elementary Teachers, Lived Experience.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Department of Education's paradigm shift to an inclusive education system in which students with special needs are mainstreamed into a regular learning environment with cognitively regular students has been a goal of inclusive education advocates for decades. Regular teachers are mostly responsible for ensuring an adequate learning environment for children with special needs who engage in inclusive school programs; they play a crucial role in the

modern educational setting. Access to a high-quality education is a basic human right. However, this is not the case for the majority of students. Some of them must fight for the education they deserve.

If the acceptance and practices of ordinary teachers in the classroom do not reflect a greater awareness of various disabilities, the educational opportunity for children in this environment may be hampered. In fully inclusive public-school classrooms, students with a variety of developmental needs, from typically developing students to those with severe and profound disabilities, are well-known to exist. Therefore, it becomes difficult, particularly for lower-level teachers with or without additional experience in dealing with students with special needs, to offer balanced support for each learner. Consequently, the department's mission to offer quality education for all may be impeded.

This study, titled "Listening to Elementary Teachers' Voices in an Inclusive Classroom: A Retrospect of their Experiences" aimed to find out the lived experiences, challenges encountered, coping mechanisms and insights of public elementary school teachers in implementing inclusive education in schools. The participants were coming from the schools of Bunawan District, Division of Davao City, Region XI.

This study proposed its benefits to the DepEd, particularly the schools of the Division of Davao City, in hopes to look into their inclusive education practices and program trainings to help the teachers in handling inclusive classes in these challenging times. It also proposed to the school principals and school, for them to gain a clear understanding of teachers' challenges faced in their respective stations in relation to inclusive education. The findings of the study shall provide the scenario as to how teachers are challenged to become inclusive teachers in schools. This study also provided research literature which could also serve as basis for future researchers who would wish to conduct a study parallel to the themes of this study and or applying other categories that their study will cover.

In conclusion, this study was conducted to learn about the lived experiences, problems, coping strategies, and insights of public elementary school teachers who are adopting inclusive education. The research sought to give a complete picture of the reality encountered in inclusive classrooms by concentrating on teachers from schools in

Bunawan District of the Division of Davao City, Region XI. The findings provided unique views on the practicalities of inclusive education, highlighted instructors' support requirements, and helped to build more successful techniques for establishing inclusive learning environments. This study not only shed light on teachers' experiences, but it also highlighted the significance of continual support and modification to improve the success of inclusive education approaches.

II. METHOD

The study was conducted using a qualitative-inquiry-based phenomenological research design using open-ended questions. Phenomenological approaches are particularly effective at bringing to the fore individual experiences and perceptions from their own points of view, and so challenging structural or normative assumptions. Adding an interpretive component to phenomenological research allows it to inform, support, or question policy and action by allowing it to be utilized as the foundation for practical theory (Lester et al., 2009).

Further, this study also employed participants' observations in an In-Depth Interview (IDI). It is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions that explore a social or human problem. It builds a holistic picture, analyzes words, reports, detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. Furthermore, real life situations need to be explored in terms of their contextual nature as seen by the participants. Therefore, phenomenology is an appropriate and applicable technique to explore the topics on the lived experiences of home economics teachers in public secondary schools. Common themes will be analyzed, coded and extracted from all of the interviews.

This study was conducted in DepEd Region XI, Division of Davao City, specifically in the schools of Bunawan District. Only 10 participants from different elementary schools as the key informants were included and were purposely selected based on the nature of their work as classroom teachers and who already experienced working in the Department of Education for at least three years or more. The purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses.

In gathering the data, I prepared the interview guide which is composed of three (3) main significant questions which inquired about the experiences of elementary school teachers. A thorough deliberation was made on the aspect of determining the problems of teachers in their effort to become effective and efficient new normal teachers in schools. I made sure that my interview guide was validated by the experts. Moreover, I made sure that all ethical protocols were observed and implemented as I collected the data.

In conclusion, this study used a qualitative phenomenological research approach with open-ended

questions to dive deeply into the individual experiences and views of elementary school teachers. The research used phenomenological methodologies to successfully emphasize personal perspectives and question traditional assumptions, with an interpretative component that helps practical theory development and informs policy and action. The study also included thorough observations from In-Depth Interviews (IDI), which provided a comprehensive picture of the participants' experiences in their natural environments. The purposive sampling approach guaranteed that the informants selected reflected the study's aims. The data gathering approach was rigorously planned, including a verified interview guide and respect to ethical guidelines.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first theme presented the lived experiences of teachers in the implementation of inclusive education in the elementary classes. Inclusive education systems provide a better-quality education for all pupils and are helpful in reducing discriminatory attitudes. For the participants in this study, the majority described their general view of an inclusive classroom as a classroom where there is equity amidst diversity. The idea of inclusive classrooms is very appealing but putting it into practice calls for a significant amount of preparation as well as patience and compassion on the side of the teachers. Further, some teachers have not been exposed to classrooms with students with special needs, which can be a disadvantage. The first year may be particularly challenging for new special education teachers. Lastly, academic performance, peer interactions, conduct, mental health, and long-term outcomes in adulthood may all be adversely affected by a lack of social skills.

The second theme presented the coping strategies of teachers on the challenges they experienced. The inherent contradiction that exists between high demands and special needs is one of the most contentious issues that arises in the context of educational inclusion. Patience is more than just a virtue for those who work in education especially in inclusive settings; it's a requirement of the profession itself. Teachers, like most individuals, will have certain pet peeves and annoyances, maybe more so than people who choose other types of careers.

The third theme presented educational management insights drawn from the from the experiences and challenges of elementary school mainstreaming teachers. The existence of diversity in the classroom encourages pupils to evaluate thoughts and viewpoints other than those they have already established or those were formed in early childhood. By exposing pupils to perspectives vastly dissimilar to their own, it affords them the opportunity to critically evaluate their own views and investigate the world in novel ways. The atmosphere of the classroom is one of the most significant variables that contribute to the overall learning experience of the students and even the overall environment of schools. Students that have a positive and supportive attitude toward their classrooms provide the best environment for learning.

The results revealed, overall, that the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in implementing inclusive education showed the following themes: equity amidst inclusivity, challenged but competent teachers, considering learners improved social skills and hurdling mainstreaming issues. Further, there were three (3) subthemes identified on the hurdling mainstreaming issues as the challenges encountered by the participants, these are lack of formal training for teachers, lack of parental support and the lack of facilities. The coping mechanisms of teacher participants on the challenges they experienced were teachers' training program for mainstreaming classes, cultivating patience as teachers, and teacher-parents' partnerships. The educational management insights drawn from the participants were understanding the beauty of learners' diversity and the importance of supportive school environment.

Teachers in inclusive classrooms and schools believed that in handling learners' differences, there should be fairness. Everyone in school whether regular or children with special needs deserves equal chances, justice, and treatment. Teachers in schools considered first the improved social participation and skills as a success determiner in inclusive classes. When all types of students are able to socially connect and adjust to any situation in an inclusive set-up, teachers feel accomplished and were able to do their part. They considered themselves competent educators learning from their experiences. However, teachers are challenged with different issues and problems regarding inclusion. They continue to hurdle the lack of training provided for them, the lack of basic support from the parents of the learners with special needs, and the lack of learning materials and facilities for the special children.

The findings of this study shed light on the various experiences of public elementary school teachers handling inclusive classrooms. The study investigated the educators' actions and reactions. These experiences, acquired through systematic interviews, can help other educators interested in the phenomenon under study, as well as other scholars pursuing comparable lines of study. Participants' coping techniques can be used as a resource for those who find themselves in a similar position.

Based on the findings of the study, the DepEd administrators and heads may craft teacher enhancement programs through face-to-face training or through webinars focusing on handling inclusive classes and implementing instructions in schools. Teachers may continue their personal efforts to learn how to handle inclusive classrooms and provide instructions as guided by different orders promulgated by the Department of Education. The policymakers or the government especially those who have the power or authority to create educational mandates, policy actions, and orders to craft guidelines in providing special facilities for learners with special needs in schools. Lastly, Future researchers may embark on the same research with different participants, place and school. Other avenues not scrutinized in this research may also be explored.

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