

ATTITUDES OF UNIVERSITY FACULTY TOWARD INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is an educational approach that has become a worldwide phenomenon. Accordingly, most of the studies conducted on teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education are quantitative in nature. Hence, this study explored the attitudes of university faculty toward the inclusion of students with special needs. This qualitative study employed the phenomenological research design. The participants in the study who were identified through purposive sampling involved fourteen (14) university faculty. The inclusion criteria for the key informants considered those faculty without formal education and training background in special education but with experience in teaching college students with special needs. The data gathering was done through a semi-structured interview that lasted for an hour or more. This method of data-collection allowed the researchers to ask follow-up questions to saturate the information from the participants. The interview questions were guided through an aid memoire that was developed based on an a priori code. Audio recordings and field notes were used to help the researchers in the transcription of the data. A member check was conducted with the key informants after the transcription of their interviews to observe the correctness and novelty of the collected data. Through the cool and warm analyses of the data, three themes emerged, namely: a) being egalitarian, b) being sensitive, and c) being accountable. The themes that emerged from the analyses of the gathered data show that the university faculty have positive attitudes toward students with special needs.

KEYWORDS

accommodation, disability, inclusive education

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is an educational approach that has become a worldwide phenomenon. The inclusive education movement is a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through accommodations and modifications in the curriculum, structures, teaching strategies and teaching-learning environment as a whole. It provides students with and without special needs equal opportunity to fully and actively participate in all school activities (Rana, 2012) which enable all learners to develop their skills and potentials. It aims to provide quality education in a learning environment that allows students with and without disability to learn together in mainstream classrooms (Sharma et al., 2006). Inclusive education gives all children the experience of learning in an environment where diversity is the norm rather than the exception. Accordingly, inclusive classrooms provide students with and without special needs an avenue to experience having age-appropriate role-models and social interactions with peers which are contributory to positive learning environment (O'Rourke and Houghton, 2008). This educational approach supports Paulo Friere's emphasis on a socially just model of education which advocates equality of access to education and the transformation of educational settings to accommodate all students.

The benefits of including students with special needs in regular classes are widely recognized. Empirical evidence shows that students with special needs are able to learn various skills within inclusive classrooms. Inclusive education allows students with special needs to socialize with their peers without special needs and actively participate in class activities which help develop their social competence, communication skills, behavior skills, and academic performance (Fisher and Meyer, 2002; Copeland et al., 2004). This educational approach also benefits students without special needs (Fischer et al., 2000; Carter and Hughes, 2006). Studies (Cushing and Kennedy, 1997; Fischer et al., 2000; Shadreck, 2012) show that students without special needs who are in inclusive classes have gained greater appreciation for differences and increased levels of academic engagement.

In the Philippines, the thrust of inclusive education has been espoused not only by the elementary and secondary schools but also by the Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). The motivation to accommodate and improve on the quality of educational services for persons with special needs in HEI's is influenced by several laws and policies which include the 1987 Constitution of the Philippines under Article XIV, Section 1 which provides that "*The State shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels and shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all*"; Republic Act 7277 (Magna Carta for Disabled Persons and its Implementing Rules and Regulations); Republic Act 9442 (An act amending Republic Act 7277, otherwise known as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons and for Other Purposes); and the CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 23, series of 2000 (CHED Guidelines 2011). The impetus of implementing this educational paradigm shift in the country was further influenced by the Salamanca Declaration in 1994 at the World Congress on special needs education. This conference reaffirmed the commitment of the participating countries including the Philippines to promote the objective of Education for All (EFA) by considering the fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach of inclusive education particularly by enabling schools to serve all children including those with special educational needs (UNESCO 1994).

Although the legal foundations for inclusive education in the Philippine HEI's have been clearly laid in the "Guidelines in the admission of students with disabilities in higher education and post-secondary institutions" (CHED Guidelines 2011), these do not guarantee the full implementation and the attainment of the objective of the program for students with special needs in colleges and universities. According to Loreman (2007) while laws and policies on inclusive education are important, the attitude of the educators to comply shall not be taken for granted. Attitude is a predisposition to respond positively or negatively towards a certain idea, object, person, or event which is manifested through behaviors (Gumus and Capar, 2011). In this study, attitude is an evaluation of faculty members' reaction towards students with special needs.

The teachers' attitude towards inclusive education is an important factor to determine the success of inclusion policy (Burke and Sutherland, 2004). The attitude of teachers towards inclusive education affects their acceptance of the policy which is also likely to influence their commitment to implementing it (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Agbenyega, 2007). In fact, the negative attitudes of teachers towards inclusion of students with special needs may impede the success of an inclusionary program (Van Reusen et al., 2001). Hence, inclusive education should not be ignored when striving to provide equal access for students with disabilities in HEIs.

The study of Baker et al. (2012) for example shows that the teachers have positive attitudes towards inclusive education and that they are willing to provide accommodations to students with special needs. In contrast, the study of Shadreck (2012) indicated that the teachers show negative attitudes towards inclusive education. There are some studies which claim that the teachers have positive attitudes towards inclusive education but with some varied conditions. For example, in the study conducted by Nelson et al. (1990), the results show that the faculty members were willing to provide instructional accommodations to students with learning disabilities; however, there were statistically significant differences in the responses of the faculty members according to the school where they teach. While the teachers have positive attitude towards inclusion, there remain some concerns about implementing some inclusive education programs. Researchers indicated that variables like gender, age, position, the type and level of the child's handicap, the level of the support the teacher and students receive from the school, local education authority administration and support services, the teacher's knowledge of inclusion, and the number of in-service training courses attended influence the attitude of teachers towards inclusion (Secer 2010; Shadreck 2012).

It is widely acknowledged that the teachers' attitudes can create positive or negative expectations and behaviors which increase or limit the successful inclusion of students with special needs in educational environments. The results of the studies on attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education show inconsistencies. Apart from the diversity of the research findings on the attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education, most of the studies conducted were among the teachers in the elementary and secondary schools (Loreman et al., 2007). Despite research claims (Konur, 2006; Leyser et al., 2011; Baker et al., 2012) that the number of students with special needs pursuing college degrees is continuously increasing as a result of the legislations and policies on inclusive education; the literature review conducted by the researchers in this study show that there is scarcity of research on teachers' attitude toward inclusive education in the Higher Educational Institutions. Rae et al. (2010) pointed out that teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education may differ when teaching older persons with special needs because of the additional support that they require. This may imply that college students with special needs may also need more accommodation and attention from teachers due to the complexity of their academic requirements. Hence, it is imperative to know the university faculty's attitudes toward inclusive education as these attitudes are predictors of the success of inclusion (Hammond and Ingalls, 2003). Unfortunately, the researchers in this study found limited studies on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education in the Philippines except the study of Marzo and Pascua (2008) that looked into the teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education in public elementary schools in the Northern part of Nueva Vizcaya. The study revealed that the public elementary teachers have positive attitudes towards inclusive education. The findings of Marzo and Pacua (2012) further show that among the three profile variables used in the study, only class size was identified to have positive correlation with the acceptance of inclusive education; age and length of service were found to be negatively correlated with acceptance to inclusive education.

There is a need to conduct research on the attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education on a regular basis (Mamah et al., 2011). This is probably because attitude can be changed over time. For example, the comparative study conducted by Leyser et al. (2011) with the 1996/7 and 2006/7 faculty members of teacher training colleges in Israel reveals that although there were no significant group differences found in faculty members' willingness to provide instructional, technological and testing adaptations and that attitudes toward students with disabilities in teacher education were positive in both studies, the researchers noted that more faculty members in the later study expressed willingness to respond to student requested

accommodations, spend more time assisting students with disabilities, and had the necessary knowledge and skills to make accommodations. The study also shows that in terms of the interest of the two groups, the earlier study had interest in learning about disabilities, while in the later study more faculty members expressed interest in legal mandates which according to the researchers is probably because of the passage of recent legislation and the interest of the latter group of respondents to understand the implications for them and for their college.

It is also important to note that teachers' attitude towards inclusive education may differ from country to country (Moberg 2003). For example, the cross-cultural study of teacher attitudes toward inclusive education in Germany, Israel, Ghana, Taiwan, the Philippines, and the USA conducted by Leyser et al. (1994, as cited by Rana, 2012) shows differences. Particularly, the study shows that that the teachers in Germany and USA were more favourable to inclusive education than the teachers in the Philippines, Taiwan, Ghana, and Israel. The positive attitudes of the teachers in USA were associated by the authors to the wide implementation of inclusive education legislations and policies in the country. The German teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusive education were linked to their sensitivity to minority groups. On the contrary, the negative attitudes of the teachers in the Philippines, Taiwan, Ghana, and Israel were viewed by the authors to be related to poor teacher training on inclusive education.

Notably, most of the studies conducted on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education are quantitative in nature. Although the questionnaires that were used in the different studies were statistically considered valid and reliable, it is agreed by researchers (Stevens and Everington, 2001; Avramidis and Norwich, 2002) that this method has limitations in describing the feelings and thoughts of the respondents due to the restrictions in their responses. The responses of the teachers to the questionnaires may not necessarily be the same with what they actually do (Stevens and Everington, 2001). Hence, researchers (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Beyene and Tizazu, 2010; Baker et al., 2012; Kalyva et al., 2007) suggest the conduct of other methods of study to describe the teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education. To address these gaps, this study sought to explore the attitudes of the university faculty members towards students with special needs through qualitative research. The results of this study can have a substantial impact in the development of programs for the enhancement of the teaching and learning process in an inclusive class in the HEIs.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted based on a qualitative research paradigm using phenomenology. Phenomenology allows individuals experiencing a phenomenon to describe their experience exactly as it appears in their consciousness. Hence, in this study, the researchers explored the attitudes of the university faculty toward students with special needs. During the interview, the participants described their reactions toward students with disabilities who were enrolled in their regular classes.

Upon the approval of the conduct of the study by the head of the Graduate Studies of Saint Louis University, the researchers selected the participants through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is selecting participants with the experience of the phenomenon under study. To ensure that the researchers will gather the pertinent data that will address the objective of the study, the following selection criteria were considered: a) the faculty does not have formal education or training in special education and b) the faculty experienced teaching a college student with special education needs. Fourteen (14) faculty who qualified for the selection criteria volunteered to participate in this study. The students with special education

needs taught by the faculty included those with visual impairment and hearing impairment. Out of the fourteen (14) key informants, nine (9) were teachers of students with visual impairment and five (5) were teachers of students with hearing impairment. All the key informants taught the students with special education needs in an inclusive class setting.

The researchers primarily gathered the data through interview. The aide memoire developed from an a priori code based on the human layer of experiences derived from the focus of the study guided the researchers in the conduct of the semi-structured interview with the participants. Follow-up questions were asked to the participants until the saturation of the information. The researchers made use of an audiotape and field notes to keep the veracity of the data. The whole duration of the interview was audio-recorded. The researchers also used field notes to take down key concepts and salient points from the participants.

The researchers sent a consent form to all the teachers identified by the Institute of Inclusive Education (IIE) office who taught students with special education needs at the university. Fourteen (14) faculty members who qualified for the selection criteria signified their willingness to participate in the study. The objectives of the study and the interview guide questions were given to the participants prior to their interview schedule. The participants were informed that they may quit their participation at any time they want. The interviews with the respondents took place at their most convenient time and place.

The recordings and field notes gathered from the interviews with the participants were transcribed by the researchers. A member check was done with each of the participants after their interview was transcribed, read and re-read by the researchers. Corrections were done to the statements of the participants that were clarified during the member check.

To analyze the data, the researchers utilized Moustakas' (1994) framework of data analysis of phenomenological design. First, the researchers read the transcriptions repetitively. Second, the researchers identified the significant statements. Third, the researchers clustered the significant statements, and lastly, the researchers created the themes. These frameworks allowed the researchers to give meaning to the experiences of the faculty members on the inclusion of college students with special needs in their regular classes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The cool and warm analyses of the data gathered from the in-depth interviews of the participants yielded the following themes; namely: a) being egalitarian, b) being sensitive, and c) being supportive.

Being Egalitarian

This theme refers to the equal treatment of the faculty members to all students in their class. It means that the faculty members do not have a prejudice against their students. Teaching diverse students is challenging as indicated by the respondents in their interviews, especially if there are not enough teaching materials and if the teachers lack training; however, all the respondents' belief in the equality of all the students motivates them to provide equal learning opportunities to their students with and without special need. The respondents state: "The school's inadequacy of teaching materials and our lack of training in inclusive education shall not be a hindrance in providing an equal learning opportunity to students with special needs because all students have the right to go to school. Disability shall not be a reason for a student not to be educated; besides, all students are capable of learning". The respondents further

pointed out that: "Quality education shall be accessible to all students; we have to exercise equality in teaching regardless of the physical appearance and abilities of the students. It's the obligation of the teacher to provide the opportunity to every student to learn". In terms of instruction and assessment, the respondents teach their students with and without special need without bias. As mentioned by the respondents: "I teach the same lesson to my students with and without disability; similarly, I also give the same assessment to them"; and "I do not give special treatment to my students with special need but I do some accommodations in my class activities which I believe benefits everyone in the class". The faculty members' recognition and respect to the value of each student inspire them to try their best to make everyone in the class learn. According to the respondents, they use teaching strategies and prepare activities that will ensure that all students in the class including the students with special need will learn the lesson. As said by the respondents: "I make use of various teaching strategies because I want all my students to learn"; "I see to it that the all the students in my class will be able to do the activities that I require them"; and "When asking my students to have a group activity, I make sure that the student with special need is involved. I usually go near his group to see to it that he interacts with his group mates".

All the respondents recognize the fact that all students have the right to quality education. This is the motivating factor that encourages the faculty members to try their best to make everyone in the class to learn. As said by the respondents: "I believe that all students have the right to good education, so before I go to teach in my class, I carefully plan the class activities and think of an appropriate strategy to deliver my lesson in order to ensure that all my students will actively participate for them to understand and learn the lesson"; and "No student including those with special needs shall be deprived of quality education; that is, the teacher shall see to it that everyone is attended to in the class".

Furthermore, the respondents are also one in saying that there is a need to make all students feel that they belong to the class. This is evident in the interviews and class observations conducted by the researcher. In the interviews, the respondents said, "I encourage my students including the student with special need to share their opinions or to ask questions during class discussions"; and "I ask my students without special need to give assistance to the student with special need during class activities. I find this effective in making the students with and without special need to realize the meaning of learning to live together".

Being Sensitive

The results of the interviews and class observations show that the faculty members are sensitive to the needs of the students with special needs. Interestingly, the sensitivity of the faculty members made them better understand the behaviors of the students with special needs. The faculty members pointed this out in their interviews: "I do not force my student to join a group if he is not familiar with any of the members"; and "Just like any student in the regular class, there are times that the students with special needs just want to be quite and listen to the teacher during class discussions, so I do not compel him/her to recite.

In the interviews, the respondents claim that their decisions for the activities and requirements are influenced by the presence of students with special needs in their class. As told by the respondents: "It is challenging to have a student with special need because you need to consider if he/she can do the activities that you plan to give to the class. This is supported by an example cited by one of the respondents, "I once wanted to start my class with a game but when I remembered that I have a blind student in my class, I modified the rules so that my blind student will also be able to participate and enjoy the game".

The sensitive attitude of the respondents towards students with special needs makes them more flexible in their classroom management. As told by the respondents: "In preparing the seat plan, I prefer a seating arrangement in an alphabetical order; however, since I have a student with special need whose caregivers asked me to let the student sit in front, I did not insist on my preference instead I also asked the other students to seat where they are most comfortable to stay. Although the student with special need often would choose to stay in front which is advantageous to me because I can easily monitor him".

Being Accountable

Some of the respondents consider teaching students with special needs challenging because they need to employ various teaching strategies in order to cater to the needs of all their students and to enable them to participate in the class activities. As many teachers mentioned, "I have to think of different strategies in order to make all the students understand my lesson".

In the interviews, the respondents admitted that they are afraid that they will not be able to meet the needs and the expectations of their students with special needs. Although it is not their first time to teach students with special needs, the teachers find their experience to be insufficient. The feeling of lack of teaching competence of the teachers of students with special needs due to lack of training and orientation, leads them to collaborate with other teachers and to ask help to concerned persons and offices. This is supported by the teachers' statements: "I still have this fear that I will not be able to teach the lesson well despite the fact that this is no longer my first time to teach students with special needs and so I would always ask for suggestions from my colleagues how and or what materials can I use to teach my lesson"; "I go to the Institute of Inclusive Education office to ask how to deal with students with visual impairment and I also ask for some instructional materials which I can use in my class"; and "I would often ask the caregiver of my student to help in reviewing our lesson in their home."

The accommodation in teaching like the use of differentiated instruction in the delivery of the lesson in an effort to help the student with special need to be able to do the same work as his or her peers is another challenge mentioned by the respondents. As cited by the respondents, they spend much time in thinking for the necessary accommodations in the class activities to ensure full participation of the students with special needs. This challenge was confirmed in the interviews with the respondents when they said, "The teacher needs to be creative if he wants to make the students learn. He needs to think of appropriate activities that will allow the student with special need to actively participate in the given task. Although this is taxing because of the time needed in the planning and preparation of the activities and of the instructional materials". For example, one respondent cited that he has to think for some time of an instructional material that will allow the student with visual impairment to have a concrete model of the concept being discussed which he does not do in his classes where there are no students with visual impairment. The respondents also said that they give real-life-examples when discussing their lesson for the students to understand difficult concepts.

The respondents also show openness to the challenge of using their free time to accommodate the students with special needs. The respondents pointed these out in their interviews: "Because of shyness to ask question inside the class, sometimes, my student with special need would come to the office during my free time to ask me to explain the lesson further or to clarify some instructions on their assignment"; "I spend my free time for consultation with the caregiver of my student with special need to discuss matters that will

help him cope with the activities and the lessons”; and “I go to the Institute of Inclusive Education office to have my examination or quiz be brailled”.

Discussion

The implementation of inclusive education placed regular teachers in a challenging situation since they are not prepared for the demands of teaching students with disabilities. Diversity is perceived as one of the challenges of teachers which compel them to strive to facilitate the learning and participation of all students. Most of the regular teachers do not have enough training in teaching students with special needs in an inclusive class. Eleweke and Rodda (2002) further noted that the support services needed in teaching students with special needs are inadequate. The issues in the implementation of inclusive education in many developing countries do not differ from the plights of the participants in this study as was indicated in the interviews with the respondents. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the respondents in this study show favorable attitude to students with special needs. The response of the faculty members to the students with special needs highlights the attitude of being egalitarian, being sensitive, and being accountable.

The egalitarian attitude of the respondents towards the students has moved them to think of ways on how to help the students with special needs to learn the lesson which in the end, benefits all the students in the class including those without special needs. From the interviews, it can be said that the faculty members do not have prejudice towards students with special needs. Hence, they provide the same educational opportunity to students with and without special needs in their class. The students with and without special needs learn the same competencies. There is no special treatment given to students with special needs. In addition, the respect of the faculty members to the students is exuded in their teaching practices. This positive attitude of the respondents may have been affected by their exposure to students with special needs as this is not their first time to teach in an inclusive class. In the study of Al-Zyoudi (2006), Avramidis and Kalvya (2007) as cited by Sharma et al. (2009), and Fichten et al. (1988), they found out that the teachers who have been exposed to teaching students with special needs for a longer time were more likely to feel more positive about implementing the policy of inclusive education.

As shown in this study, the sensitive attitude of the respondents has helped the faculty members to better understand the behaviors of their students with special needs. In a study conducted by (Brandes and Crowson, 2009; Elik et al., 2010) they pointed out that the ability of the teacher to accept the condition of their students motivate and enable them to deliver their lesson better and be able to cater to the needs of their students. It is very important that teachers know their students for them to easily integrate the students' interests and experiences in their lesson. In this study, the understanding of the respondents to the needs of students with special needs prompted them to carefully plan their class activities and choose their teaching strategies in order to actively engage the students. Engagement in the class activities is not the sole responsibility of a student. The teachers also have the responsibility in providing the avenue and in facilitating the engagements of the students.

Meanwhile, the respondents feel accountable in ensuring that the students with special needs are comfortable in their class. As shown in this study, part of the respondents' concern with their classroom management includes the seating arrangement of the students. The respondents give freedom to the students to choose where they want to be seated. Although as mentioned in the interviews the students with special needs would often seat in front. Notably, this form of seating arrangement promotes favorable learning environment which

helps in enhancing the performance of the students with special needs. For example, in the study conducted by Zomorodian et al. (2012) among medical students, they found out that seating position is significantly related to the student's attendance and educational performance.

The feeling of accountability of the respondents towards providing quality education to the students with special needs made them resourceful. Through their own initiatives, the faculty members tried to look for solutions to the challenges that they encounter in teaching students with special needs. For example, the respondents admitted that they feel incompetent in teaching and in meeting the needs of the students with special needs so they collaborate with colleagues and other experts. Moreover, the feeling of accountability of the respondents to the welfare of the students with special needs challenged them to sacrifice their time. As shown in the responses of the faculty members, they spend much time in planning and preparing for their lessons where they have a student with special need. The respondents further pointed out that they allot their free time for consultations with the students with special needs. This finding proves the contention of Loreman (2007) that the attitude of teachers greatly influences the success of students with special needs in an inclusive class. In contrast, the findings in this study negates the findings of De Luke (2000, as cited by Loreman et al., 2007) that the feeling of the incompetence of teachers leads to unfavorable attitude toward including children with diverse learning needs in the regular class.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that the faculty members have a positive attitude toward the inclusion of students with special education needs in regular classes. The faculty members use their resourcefulness to address the needs of their students with special education needs. The understanding of the faculty members of the needs of their students with special education needs is manifested by their initiatives in providing accommodations. Moreover, the acceptance of the faculty members of the students with special education needs in their regular classes is translated in the efforts that they exerted in ensuring that everyone in their class learns the competencies needed in their particular program.

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