



LEADING AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PUBLIC-SCHOOL HEADS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of public school heads in leading inclusive learning environments, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges, strategies, and successes they encounter. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study provides a nuanced understanding of stakeholder engagement in educational policymaking, shedding light on the subjective experiences and meanings that shape policy development processes. A total of ten participants were included in this study, with five participating in in-depth interviews (IDI) and the remaining five in focus group discussions (FGD). The findings of this study yield significant implications for teaching practice, school leadership, policy development, and teacher professional growth within the framework of inclusive education. Moreover, shared responsibility for inclusive education within the community emphasizes that inclusion extends beyond the classroom. It calls for collective action from stakeholders teachers, parents, students, local leaders, and community organizations to build a supportive, respectful, and empathetic learning culture. The success of inclusive education depends on a concerted effort from all stakeholders – DepEd, school heads, teachers, and parents. By working together, ensuring continuous professional development, and embracing an inclusive mindset, we can create a supportive, accessible, and equitable educational environment for all students.

KEYWORDS - *Inclusive Learning Environment, Lived Experiences, Public School Heads*

INTRODUCTION

Creating an inclusive learning environment is a fundamental goal for educators and school leaders worldwide. Inclusive education promotes equity, diversity, and accessibility, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, abilities, or differences, have the opportunity to thrive and succeed. As such, understanding the perspectives and experiences of public school heads in leading inclusive learning environments is crucial for fostering educational equity and excellence.

Inclusive education goes beyond mere integration; it embraces a philosophy of acceptance, belonging, and respect for diversity. School leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the culture, policies, and practices of their schools to create environments where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential.

Additionally, Jarvis (2020) states that Inclusive education, rooted in social justice principles, aims to address educational inequalities, exclusion, and discrimination. Originally focused on disability and special educational needs, it now values diversity among all students. Common themes include fairness, equality, respect, diversity, participation, community, leadership, commitment, shared vision, and collaboration. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines inclusive education as systemic reform to provide an equitable and participatory learning environment.

Moreover, Ainscow and Sandill (2020) underscores the significant role that school leadership plays in fostering inclusive learning environments, particularly in public schools. It highlights that the values and practices of school heads are central to the success of inclusive education initiatives. Public school heads are at the forefront of initiating and sustaining inclusive practices. They are responsible for shaping the school's vision, policies, and strategies to ensure that every student, regardless of background or ability, has access to quality education. By prioritizing inclusion in their leadership agenda, they create a foundation for a school culture that values diversity and equity. School leadership is crucial in creating inclusive learning environments. Through their values, practices, and direct engagement with the school community, public school heads not only drive inclusive education initiatives but also foster a culture that embraces diversity and provides supportive systems for both educators and learners.

Moreover, in the study by Sanda et al. (2023) conducted in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, it was revealed that the leadership style of school heads during the COVID-19 pandemic played a crucial role in ensuring the continuity of education despite unprecedented challenges. School leaders exhibited not only resilience but also a proactive approach by leveraging technology to implement alternative modes of instruction, such as online learning and modular delivery systems. Their ability to foster collaboration between teachers, parents, and community stakeholders ensured that no student was left behind, even in the face of limited resources. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of empathy and emotional intelligence, as leaders provided mental and emotional support to their staff and students, understanding the stress and anxiety brought about by the pandemic. These leaders also prioritized the health and safety of their school communities, implementing strict health protocols and adapting quickly to government policies and guidelines. Ultimately, the study reinforces the idea that effective school leadership during times of crisis requires a blend of visionary leadership, community engagement, and a commitment to ensuring the well-being of the entire school ecosystem.



In Gallego's (2022) study conducted in Davao del Sur, it further reveals that teachers in remote schools face numerous challenges, including limited resources, difficult access to educational facilities, and the responsibility of addressing the diverse needs of students from underprivileged communities. Despite these obstacles, the dedication of teachers shines through, as they often go beyond their teaching duties by acting as mentors, counselors, and role models for their students. The study emphasizes that teaching in remote areas not only requires perseverance but also a deep sense of purpose, as these educators are instrumental in breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting social change. Furthermore, the role of community involvement is underscored, as teachers work closely with local stakeholders to improve educational outcomes and foster a culture of learning. Ultimately, the study portrays teaching in remote schools as a noble profession that leaves a lasting impact not only on the students but also on the entire community.

Through an exploration of the challenges and successes encountered by public school heads, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of effective leadership practices for inclusive education. By amplifying the voices of school leaders and sharing their insights, this study endeavors to inspire collaborative efforts towards building more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students.

Although inclusive education is receiving increasing attention, there is still a notable lack of study on the actual experiences of public school principals in creating inclusive learning environments. While many studies have examined the significance of inclusive practices and policies, fewer have particularly investigated the viewpoints and encounters of school leaders who are at the forefront of implementing and advocating for inclusion in their schools. Gaining insight into the difficulties, approaches, and achievements faced by public school administrators in guiding inclusive learning settings is essential for cultivating proficient leadership methods and support systems that promote educational fairness and superiority.

This study also seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice by offering practical recommendations that school leaders can implement to foster inclusivity. By exploring the unique challenges and successes faced by public school heads, it hopes to develop a deeper understanding of how leadership practices can be tailored to meet the diverse needs of students, particularly those from marginalized or disadvantaged groups. Additionally, the study aspires to contribute to the development of policies and guidelines that promote a whole-school approach to inclusion, ensuring that all aspects of the school—curriculum, teacher training, physical environment, and community partnerships—are aligned with inclusive values. By capturing the lived experiences of school heads, this research not only highlights the current realities of inclusive education but also sets the foundation for ongoing professional development programs aimed at enhancing leadership competencies in diverse educational settings. The study's ultimate goal is to inspire systemic change, equipping school leaders to be champions of inclusion and ensuring that every student has access to an equitable and supportive learning environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The more educators have learned about students' learning styles and needs, the more we have come to understand how deeply students' backgrounds influence those traits. Factors such as where they come from, their economic status, family stability, and cultural assets all shape a student's personality and directly contribute to how they learn and interact within the classroom environment. By leveraging these strengths, educators can tailor their programs and instructional methods to better meet students' individual needs, thereby fostering engagement and ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to succeed. Moreover, Sindhu (2022) argues that this approach encourages a more holistic view of students, viewing them not just as learners but as individuals whose varied experiences enrich the classroom. It also empowers students by validating their identities, promoting a sense of belonging, and preparing them for a diverse and interconnected world.

On the other hand, the study of Theoharis (2019) discusses the challenges that school heads face in implementing inclusive practices. It also explores how school leaders' commitment to social justice can drive efforts to create inclusive learning environments, even in the face of resistance from other stakeholders. The study is valuable for understanding the lived experiences of public school heads who navigate the complexities of inclusion. By examining these experiences, the research highlights the importance of resilience and advocacy in the face of obstacles, revealing how passionate leadership can influence school culture and promote systemic change. Additionally, the findings provide insights into the strategies that successful school leaders employ to foster collaboration and engage stakeholders in the pursuit of equitable education for all students, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of effective leadership in inclusive settings.

Along with another work provides insights into how school heads' reflective practices shape the inclusive culture of a school. By engaging in continuous reflection on their own leadership styles and the needs of their school communities, principals can better foster inclusive learning environments. This reflective approach allows school leaders to identify areas for improvement and adapt their strategies to effectively address the diverse needs of all students. Furthermore, by modeling reflective practices, principals can inspire teachers and staff to engage in similar processes, ultimately cultivating a shared commitment to inclusivity and collaboration within the entire school community (Sergiovanni, 2021).

"Inclusive Education Strategies" aims to provide educators with practical strategies and approaches for creating inclusive learning environments. It covers a range of topics related to inclusive education, including understanding diversity, promoting equity, accommodating students with disabilities, and fostering a sense of belonging for all learners. It serves as a comprehensive resource for educators seeking to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments. It provides practical advice, evidence-based strategies, and real-world examples to support educators in meeting the diverse needs of all learners and promoting success for every student (UNICEF, 2018). Additionally, the resource emphasizes the importance of collaboration among educators, families, and communities to enhance the effectiveness of inclusive practices. By fostering partnerships and



encouraging shared responsibility, it seeks to create a supportive ecosystem that nurtures the development and learning of every child.

Additionally, another study examines the experiences of school leaders in developing inclusive education policies. It focuses on how school heads balance the demands of standardized curriculum with the needs of students with diverse learning requirements. The study also discusses the lived challenges of implementing inclusive education in resource-limited public schools. By highlighting the tensions between academic accountability and the necessity for personalized support, the research sheds light on the complexities of leadership in inclusive settings. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of advocating for adequate resources and professional development to empower school leaders in their efforts to create truly inclusive educational environments (Dyson, & Millward, 2020).

Ryan (2019) explores how school leaders' lived experiences shape their ability to promote and implement inclusive education. He emphasizes the need for heads to be reflective and responsive to the challenges that arise when working with students from diverse backgrounds, particularly those with special needs. This reflective practice enables school leaders to draw on their personal and professional experiences, allowing them to understand the complexities of inclusivity and the barriers that students may face in their learning environments. They must be attuned to the unique needs of students with special needs, understanding the social, emotional, and academic challenges these students may encounter. This understanding not only informs their leadership practices but also empowers them to create tailored interventions that support student success.

Research Questions

This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of public school heads in leading inclusive learning environments. By delving into the challenges, strategies, and successes experienced by school leaders, this research aims to uncover valuable insights that can inform the development of effective policies, practices, and support mechanisms for promoting inclusivity in schools.

1. What are the lived experiences of public school heads on inclusive learning environment?
2. What are the coping mechanisms of public school heads on inclusive learning environment?
3. What educational insights gained by the public school heads on inclusive learning environment?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative research approach will be employed in this study, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of public school heads in leading inclusive learning environments. Specifically, a phenomenological research method will be utilized, aiming to understand the essence of the experiences and perspectives of public school heads in fostering inclusivity within their schools. Phenomenology offers a valuable framework for understanding the essence of human experiences and the meaning individuals attribute to their interactions within the educational policy landscape (Tindal, 2009).

By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study provides a nuanced understanding of stakeholder engagement in educational policymaking, shedding light on the subjective experiences and meanings that shape policy development processes. This method emphasizes the importance of understanding how public school heads interpret their experiences, enabling researchers to capture the richness and complexity of their roles in promoting inclusive practices.

Through examining the lived experiences of public school heads, this study aims to illuminate the multifaceted nature of leading inclusive learning environments. It seeks to uncover the complex dynamics involved in promoting inclusion, addressing barriers, and fostering a culture of acceptance and belonging within schools. By focusing on the personal narratives and insights of school leaders, the research can highlight the challenges they face, the strategies they employ, and the impact of their leadership on both students and the broader school community.

Furthermore, the phenomenological approach allows for the exploration of how public school heads navigate their relationships with various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and students. This focus on relational dynamics can enrich our understanding of how collaborative efforts contribute to the development of inclusive practices. Ultimately, this study endeavors to provide valuable insights that can inform future leadership development programs and policies aimed at enhancing inclusivity in education.

Research Participants

Purposeful sampling of public school heads from diverse geographical locations, school sizes, demographics, and socioeconomic contexts will be employed to capture a comprehensive range of experiences. Public school heads will be invited to participate in the study through email or other communication channels. Information about the research objectives, procedures, and confidentiality will be provided, and informed consent will be obtained from interested participants.

A total of ten participants will be included in this study, with five participating in in-depth interviews (IDI) and the remaining five in focus group discussions (FGD). The IDI will allow for a deep exploration of individual experiences, while the FGD will facilitate a collaborative environment for sharing insights and generating discussions about common challenges and strategies in leading inclusive learning environments. All data gathered during the IDI and FGD sessions will be recorded and transcribed to summarize the responses of the participants in an orderly manner.

The research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and strategies involved in leading inclusive learning environments by exploring the personal experiences and insights of public school heads. By involving participants from various



backgrounds, the study seeks to highlight the diversity of experiences and identify common themes and best practices that emerge from their narratives.

The combination of IDI and FGD methods will offer both deep individual insights and collaborative perspectives, enriching the overall findings. This mixed-methods approach not only enhances the robustness of the data but also allows for the triangulation of findings, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in inclusive leadership. Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute valuable insights to the field of educational leadership and inform practices that promote inclusivity in schools.

Research Instrument

To gather comprehensive and meaningful data relevant to the deeper understanding of their experiences in leading an inclusive learning environment and the lived experiences of public school heads, this study employed a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide as the primary research instrument. This qualitative tool was designed to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, practices, and challenges faced by students working as fishermen.

Data Analysis

The collected interview data will be analyzed using phenomenological analysis techniques, which involve a systematic exploration of the lived experiences described by participants. Researchers engage in a process of bracketing, setting aside preconceptions and biases, to focus solely on the participants' accounts. Through a process of thematic coding and interpretation, researchers identify common patterns, themes, and essences that emerge from the data, capturing the shared lived experiences of stakeholders.

Creswell (2013) outlines six crucial stages in qualitative data analysis that are necessary for assessing and interpreting published research findings in the realm of education. This approach typically involves a systematic process of analyzing qualitative data, often following steps such as coding, categorizing, and thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the implications of the study's findings for educational practice, policy, and future research, particularly in the context of inclusive education. Drawing from the insights and experiences of the participants, it highlights practical strategies and systemic changes needed to strengthen inclusive teaching and learning environments.

Furthermore, this chapter outlines possible directions for future research to address the gaps and emerging challenges identified throughout the study. The goal is to inform stakeholders—educators, administrators, policymakers, and community members—of the key considerations necessary to support a more equitable, responsive, and inclusive educational system.

Implications

The findings of this study yield significant implications for teaching practice, school leadership, policy development, and teacher professional growth within the framework of inclusive education. By examining the lived experiences and perceptions of educators, this research underscores the practical realities and systemic factors that influence the successful implementation of inclusive practices. These implications offer valuable guidance for schools, policymakers, and educational stakeholders aiming to create more equitable and supportive learning environments for all learners.

The findings under Main Theme 1: Evolving Understanding and Commitment to Inclusive Education highlight several key implications for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers. First, the shift from limited awareness to an informed perspective underscores the need for ongoing training and capacity-building programs to deepen teachers' understanding of inclusive practices.

As educators become more aware, their attitudes also shift from resistance to advocacy, suggesting that professional learning communities and safe spaces to share experiences can be instrumental in fostering a culture of acceptance and inclusivity. School leaders, in particular, are positioned to model inclusive values and practices, making inclusive leadership not only a professional obligation but a moral responsibility.

They must champion inclusivity through supportive policies and collaborative school environments. Moreover, the personal and professional growth experienced by teachers through inclusive teaching practices emphasizes the importance of reflection, mentorship, and continuous development. Policymakers are thus encouraged to create frameworks that sustain these efforts, such as integrating inclusive education into teacher preparation programs, leadership training, and institutional support systems. Together, these implications point to the importance of a collective, well-supported approach in building a more inclusive and equitable education system.

The insights under Main Theme 2: Monitoring and Evaluating the Effectiveness of Inclusive Strategies suggest critical implications for educational practitioners, administrators, and policymakers. The use of feedback systems for continuous improvement reveals that inclusive education thrives when schools establish mechanisms to actively listen to the voices of students, parents, and teachers.

This fosters a culture of reflection and responsiveness, allowing for timely adjustments to teaching strategies and learning environments. Data-driven decision making further strengthens this process by providing concrete evidence to inform instructional practices, resource allocation, and policy interventions. Elevating teacher training experiences also emerged as a



significant factor, emphasizing the importance of equipping educators with practical, research-informed tools and real-time coaching to better navigate inclusive classrooms.

Additionally, setting and tracking measurable goals for inclusivity helps maintain focus, accountability, and progress at all levels of the educational system. Together, these subthemes call for a strategic, evidence-based approach to monitoring inclusive education—one that values feedback, invests in teacher development, and aligns with long-term goals of equity and educational success for all learners.

The findings under Main Theme 3: Essential Elements Shaping Inclusive Learning Environments underscore the foundational structures that enable inclusive education to flourish. Firstly, the value of strong parent-teacher collaboration highlights how active partnerships between families and schools foster trust, communication, and shared accountability for student success. When parents and teachers work together, it becomes easier to identify learners' needs and implement strategies that support all children. The theme of resource availability and utilization points to the necessity of accessible learning materials, assistive technologies, and professional development to ensure no learner is left behind. Inclusive education cannot be sustained without adequate support systems.

Moreover, shared responsibility for inclusive education within the community emphasizes that inclusion extends beyond the classroom. It calls for collective action from stakeholders—teachers, parents, students, local leaders, and community organizations to build a supportive, respectful, and empathetic learning culture. Lastly, institutional policies and administrative support play a crucial role in sustaining inclusive efforts. When school leadership actively creates and enforces inclusive policies, provides guidance, and invests in continuous improvement, it empowers teachers and affirms the importance of diversity in education. Altogether, these subthemes reveal that inclusive learning environments are built through collaboration, resourcing, community involvement, and strong leadership.

Future Directions

As inclusive education continues to evolve, it is crucial to explore new strategies and refine existing practices to ensure all students, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have access to equitable learning opportunities. Future research and initiatives must focus on developing and implementing policies that are both flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of learners. In particular, there is a need to invest in more comprehensive teacher training programs that emphasize not only pedagogical skills but also emotional and social support techniques to manage diverse classrooms.

Additionally, fostering stronger collaborations between schools, families, and communities will be essential in creating environments where inclusivity is not just an educational principle but a way of life.

Department of Education

DepEd should prioritize revising and strengthening policies that promote inclusive education across all public schools. This includes creating clear guidelines for integrating inclusive practices into the curriculum, ensuring accessibility, and fostering an inclusive school culture. Regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to assess the progress and challenges of inclusive education initiatives nationwide.

Also, DepEd should increase funding and resources dedicated to ongoing professional development programs for teachers, school leaders, and support staff. These programs should focus on enhancing teachers' skills in inclusive pedagogy, as well as fostering knowledge on how to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of students with diverse learning requirements.

School Heads

School heads should take an active role in promoting inclusive education by setting a clear vision for inclusivity and encouraging a school-wide culture of acceptance and collaboration. They should lead by example in implementing inclusive practices and fostering an environment that values diversity.

Ensuring that teachers have the necessary resources, training, and emotional support to implement inclusive education is crucial. School heads should advocate for professional development opportunities and provide guidance on how to effectively teach diverse learners.

Teachers

Teachers should commit to ongoing learning and development, focusing on inclusive teaching strategies, differentiated instruction, and culturally responsive practices. Engaging in collaborative learning communities with other teachers can also foster the exchange of best practices.

Moreover, Teachers must adapt their teaching methods to meet the needs of all students, including those with special needs. This includes being flexible with classroom management, using assistive technologies, and designing activities that promote collaboration and inclusivity.

Parents

Parents must be encouraged to actively engage in their child's education, particularly in supporting inclusive practices. This can include attending parent-teacher meetings, providing feedback on their child's progress, and collaborating with teachers on strategies to support their child's learning.



Parents should advocate for their child's rights and work together with schools to ensure that their child's individual needs are met. This could involve requesting personalized learning plans, participating in decision-making processes, and providing additional support at home.

Moving forward, the success of inclusive education depends on a concerted effort from all stakeholders—DepEd, school heads, teachers, and parents. By working together, ensuring continuous professional development, and embracing an inclusive mindset, we can create a supportive, accessible, and equitable educational environment for all students.

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