

THE ADVENT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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The elementary level is known to be the foundation of lifelong learning which molds the students with the basic skills needed for holistic development, and starting from this level, students are now being catered equally considering their differences in terms of needs and difficulties. The advent of inclusive education has become a paradigm shift to topics about modern pedagogy, particularly in basic education. By definition, inclusive education refers to an approach in education which highlights the importance of inclusion among all types of learners in an open classroom setting. It is the practice of catering, assisting, and educating all learners regardless of physical, emotional, social, intellectual, linguistic, and other conditions in the same classroom environment. Therefore, through inclusive education, learners are now encouraged for having access, participation, and achievements, especially those with learners with difficulties or special educational needs. The shift from exclusion to inclusion served as a major change to the approach of educational institutions to diversity of learners.

As part of the Education for All (EFA), the Department of Education has been exerting efforts to embrace inclusive education in the Philippines, which is included to the Policy Guidelines on Inclusive Education (DepEd Order No. 72, series of 2009) to integrate learners with different abilities into the mainstream or open classrooms. Additionally, the DepEd also included to the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (Republic Act No. 10533) the concept of inclusion. Along with the K-12 curriculum is the support of inclusive education through promoting learner-centered education as a way to address the diverse needs of all students.

The concept of inclusive education started to be recognized in the year 1994 when UNESCO adopted a landmark international declaration which is known to be the Salamanca Statement. According to UNESCO (1994), inclusive education highlights the need for schools and institutions to accommodate all children, “regardless of their physical, emotional, social, intellectual, linguistic, or other conditions”. It aims for not only physical integration, but most especially, a meaningful participation from where students with different abilities are encouraged to feel belonged as a means of their academic successes. In basic education, this means adapting or evolving curriculum with appropriate teaching methods, and modified classroom environments to be aligned with the various and differing needs of all learners.

Despite the fact that inclusive education is being supported in the Philippines, it cannot be denied that the implementation still faces several challenges. These shortcomings include the lack of facilities which causes a large number of learners in a classroom; teachers who are not prepared for the challenge of inclusion which requires more directed training for them; materials that are not clearly and appropriately modified to cater each learners; and the curriculum which is not fully designed for inclusive education. However, regardless of these challenges being faced in the implementation of inclusive education, there are still a lot of organizations which support inclusive education. One movement is made by international organizations like UNICEF, which advocates for inclusive education as a key strategy to eliminate discrimination and foster equity in learning (UNICEF, 2020). Moreover, the fact that educational institutions exert continuous efforts, already shows that the promising vision will soon achieve its success.

In summary, the advent of inclusive education marks educational equity since education has become a fundamental human right. Education is not merely for those who needs less assistance. As part of the social justice, it is for all human beings regardless of the needs and

differences. It is believed that inclusive education can be beneficial not only to learners with special educational needs, but also to the society as a whole. Nevertheless, inclusive education remains a paradigm shift to educational approaches, leading to a more open society which welcomes everyone regardless of the differences and in the concept of diversity. Continued advocacy, improved and more directed teacher training, encouraged community involvement, and a clearer policy implementation are essential to making inclusive education not just an ideal, but a lived reality for all elementary learners.

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