

Inclusion Caravan

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Inclusion Caravan 2018: Inclusive education for children with disabilities in the Negros island, Philippines

[detailed format]

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1. Intentions of this document

Through this document, I intend to:

1. capture the experiences of Inclusion Caravan in increasing the understanding and capacity of pre-service (those who are pursuing Education as a course in Teacher Education Institutions) and in-service teachers (those who are already in practicing teaching as their profession) and other stakeholders on *inclusive education for children with disabilities*; and
2. through Teacher Education, provide recommendations on how to further strengthen the *inclusive education for children with disabilities* agenda in the Negros island, Philippines

2. Background of the Inclusion Caravan

As a voluntary, self-funded initiative, I started the Inclusion Caravan in 2012. Its goal is to increase the understanding and the capacity of general education teachers on inclusive education strategies for children with disabilities. Through the conduct of capacity building workshops and mentorship sessions, the initiative intends to promote one fundamental human right of children with disabilities: to learn with their peers without disabilities in general education settings.

To date, the Inclusion Caravan has engaged with at least 10,000 pre-service and in-service teachers in the Negros island, Philippines, empowering them to understand and practice inclusive education in their own classrooms. For this year, the Caravan has partnered with the Global Observatory for Inclusion (GLOBI), an international, non-profit organization that promotes inclusion through digital activism.

3. Activities of the Inclusion Caravan

Due to the fact that the realization of inclusive education requires the engagement of the bigger community outside the education system, the Inclusion Caravan this year was deliberate in organizing activities to engage not only the pre-service and in-service teachers, but also other relevant stakeholders such as the leadership of the Department of Education and Teacher Education Institutions.

Activities	Recipients	Goals
Capacity building workshops	-Elementary and high school teachers of the Department of Education	-Increase the understanding and capacity of in-service teachers on inclusive education strategies specifically for children with disabilities <i>Workshop sessions were done through</i>

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	<p>-Pre-service teachers enrolled in Teacher Education Institutions</p>	<p><i>the Department of Education's Learning Action Cell (LAC) so as not to disrupt classes. LAC sessions are a monthly platform for teachers to learn new skills related to teaching-learning process.</i></p> <p>-Increase the understanding and capacity of pre-service teachers on inclusive education strategies specifically for children with disabilities <i>Workshop sessions were done during identified dates and ran usually for one to two days.</i></p>
Community meetings	<p>-Opened to all community members interested to learn about disability rights and education</p>	<p>-Increase the awareness of community members on the rights of children with disabilities to access inclusive education <i>These sessions were organized with the partnership of community officials and were done in community halls. This activity was done in response to the need to also engage the bigger community in realizing inclusive education especially that schools are obviously a part of a bigger community.</i></p>
#DrawDisability	<p>-Opened to all 6-10-year-old children with and without disabilities in communities</p>	<p>-Increase the understanding of children with and without disabilities about disability rights and education <i>These sessions were organized with the partnership of community officials and were done in community halls. This activity was done in response to the need to also engage children with and without disabilities themselves in realizing inclusive education. Sessions would start with a storytelling activity with a moral or lesson on disability. A drawing activity would then follow inviting children to reflect on their understanding on disability rights and education through visual arts.</i></p>

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Luncheon meetings	-Leadership of the Department of Education (responsible for implementing activities to in-service teachers related to inclusive education) and Teacher Education Institutions (responsible for delivering curriculum to pre-service teachers related to inclusive education)	-Reflect on the roles that the leadership of the said institutions plays in strengthening the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities <i>These meetings were organized to provide a platform for the leadership of the Department of Education and Teacher Education Institutions to reflect on how inclusive education for children with disabilities has been promoted in schools.</i>
Tri-media exposure		-Educate the community on inclusive education for children with disabilities through the radio, print, and TV platforms <i>The Caravan this year had partnered with tri-media institutions in the Negros island to further advocate for inclusive education. Through radio and TV exposures, the Caravan was able to reach bigger audience aside from teachers.</i>

4. Observations, reflections

In doing the mentioned activities for Inclusion Caravan for eight straight weeks this year, I have had the opportunity to make the following observations as well as reflections on the situation of *inclusive education for children with disabilities* in the Negros island.

Something has already been and will be done

Policy wise, the Philippine government commits to inclusive education for all children. From the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (of which the Philippines signed and ratified) to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Goal 4 on Education to the K-12 Basic Education Curriculum Law, the government recognizes the right of every child with disability to learn in mainstream education system together with their peers without disabilities. These political commitments have been translated into specific strategies to realize inclusive education. For example, from the interaction I have had with the leadership of the Department of Education, training programs on *inclusive education for children with disabilities* have already been in place to increase the capacities of in-service teachers in accommodating children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. One supervisor of the Department of Education

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shared, 'Our office just concluded a training program where teachers and principals were taught how to handle children with disabilities – from hearing to mobility to learning – enrolled in their classrooms'.

In the context of Teacher Education Institutions, I have learned that the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has mandated all Higher Education Institutions offering Teacher Education programs to include a subject on 'Foundations of Special and Inclusive Education' effective this year. This means that every pre-service teacher, regardless of his or her specialization, should take the said subject to prepare him or her for inclusive education. From my interactions with the leadership of Teacher Education Institutions during the Inclusion Caravan's Luncheon Meetings, there seems to be an overwhelming support to the idea. In fact, certain institutions are already on the process of brainstorming how to structure the subject in Teacher Education curriculum to ensure that it is oriented towards inclusive education for children with disabilities. One Dean of a College of Education of a Teacher Education Institution stressed, 'I hope though that through this subject, we start changing attitudes among pre-service on how they perceive the education of children with disabilities. As much as possible, this subject should emphasize inclusive education and not segregation'.

The Inclusion Caravan celebrates the fact that 'something has already been and will be done' by the government for *inclusive education for children with disabilities*.

Pre-service teachers: openness to embrace inclusive education

As mentioned, the Inclusion Caravan, especially its capacity building workshops, has engaged the pre-service and in-service teachers. While it is true that pre-service teachers may have exposure in 'real' classroom settings through their Field Studies (FS), these may not be enough. Hence, generally, pre-service teachers may have limited understanding and experience working in 'real' classroom settings. However, from my experience doing the Inclusion Caravan, I argue that this situation allows pre-service teachers to be more open-minded in embracing 'new' ideas like *inclusive education for children with disabilities*. In fact, my assumption is supported by several pieces of evidence stressing that because pre-service teachers are not yet into the education system, they value open-mindedness over skepticism towards education issues that may be considered 'unpopular', *inclusive education for children with disabilities* being one.

The capacity building workshops with pre-service teachers included a session on differentiated instruction where they had the opportunity to analyze classroom scenarios involving children with disabilities and to provide recommendations on how differentiated instruction can support the children to learn and to thrive in mainstream classrooms. I personally was impressed as to how the pre-service teachers managed to provide sustainable and practical strategies for children with disabilities. While this might be a product of learning new skills from the workshops, I would also stress that this was a result of their 'openness to embrace inclusive education'. One pre-service teacher asserted, 'I do not have the right to reject a child to come to my classroom because of his disability. I will have to welcome him and do something to accommodate him in my classroom'.

The willing in-service teachers

I have deliberately used the word 'willing' in this section to describe the in-service teachers I met through the Inclusion Caravan this year. One thing is certain: in-service teachers are willing to accommodate children with disabilities in their classrooms. One teacher shared, '...more than the fact that inclusive

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education is a law, I have the obligation to welcome all children into my classroom regardless of their backgrounds'. Her statement resonates her willingness for inclusive education and this is an important trait to leverage on. However, it is important to note that while it is true that in-service teachers are willing, they need support in realizing inclusive education. Support, for the teachers, means continuous capacity building, sustainable support from special education teachers, and appropriate facilities in schools. One teacher stressed, 'I think I have the right, as a teacher, to demand for support especially that inclusive education is not merely putting a child with disability in my classroom without support. I have now learned that in order to realize inclusive education, teachers like me should be provided with appropriate support. I look forward to the time when we regular teachers have the opportunity to work with special education teachers.'

Aside from willingness, I would like to highlight some other traits that I have observed from in-service teachers through my interactions with them during the Inclusion Caravan. For one, creativity shows in how they work with children with disabilities. I remember one teacher when she shared, 'I only know basic sign language and I have two deaf students in my class. So everytime I teach them complex mathematical concepts such as exponent and logarithm, I and my deaf students have to decide what sign to use to represent exponent and logarithm. For example, I use my index finger to form a tick sign in the air to mean exponent'. Another teacher recalled, 'Our school does not have the luxury of having materials and facilities. So when I had a blind student in my science class, I used cottons, rope, and matchboxes to make a tactile model of the reproductive system'.

According to studies, teachers who are reflective on their teaching practices make effective teachers for inclusive education. This trait was manifested in this statement from one teacher I met during the Inclusion Caravan, 'I failed three students in my class before because they were non-readers. However, when these students moved to other schools, they became excellent readers and honor students. Was there a problem with how I taught those children'? His statement, especially the question he asked, emphasizes a reflective skill as well as the understanding that environmental factors are the biggest barriers to learning instead of looking at the children as the problem.

Finally, the Inclusion Caravan workshops provided in-service teachers the opportunity to express their vulnerability. While it is true that they show willingness to accommodate children with disabilities, they also express anxiety and uncertainty. One teacher intoned, 'I get nervous everytime I hear about inclusive education for children with disabilities. Not because I am not willing, but because I just do not know how to work with these children'. This is the reason why more than a capacity building platform, I am pleased to see how the Inclusion Caravan has become a safe space for teachers to discuss about *inclusive education for children with disabilities*. I definitely do not see any problem with teachers being vulnerable about their limitations. In fact, being vulnerable is a strength. The challenge now is how to provide further support to the 'willing in-service teachers'.

Parents and families of children with disabilities: their struggles

In doing the Inclusion Caravan, we would ask teachers, 'Why are children with disabilities not in school'. The teachers would respond, '...because their parents hide them'. This is a common narrative I have heard from interacting with teachers as well as with community leaders. However, when I talked with parents, I heard a different side of the story. The parents I interacted with stressed, 'We love our children to go to school. But everytime our children leave our house, all they hear are ridicule and humiliation from people. Their classmates and teachers call them 'abnormal'. So what do you expect us parents to do'?

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While it is true that some parents and families become a barrier to inclusive education, understanding the bigger picture of why and how they react or behave that way is important. From the parent's statement, the skepticism in 'bringing their child out of the house' resonates what a lot of parents and families feel about the community in general, 'There is so much judgment and misconceptions about having a child with disability. People think it is a curse, a burden that should be carried on our shoulders as parents and families'.

What should we teach to teachers?

The modules I used in doing the capacity building workshops in the Inclusion Caravan strongly embrace the social model of disability. This model stresses that in order to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities, there is a need for systems change by modifying the learning environments, for example. Hence, a critical component of the modules is the discussion on Differentiated Instruction, an approach that benefits all children, emphasizes teaching that provides students varied and multiple ways of learning. This may be done by differentiating the classroom setting, materials, content, instruction, as well as the affective component.

The teachers found the Differentiated Instruction section of the workshops to be helpful and practical. However, I observed that there seems to be that tendency of teachers and other stakeholders to think that children with disabilities require specialized pedagogy (children with autism require specific teaching strategies, for example) and that capacity building workshop contents should be structured based on specific strategies required for specific disabilities.

'What should we teach to teachers'? This I believe remains a debate that should be taken critically. This is because whatever approach to contents we embrace moving forward should prepare teachers for inclusive education both skills-wise and attitude-wise.

Promoting inclusive education from a bigger perspective

Initially, the Inclusion Caravan only focused on building the capacities of pre-service and in-service teachers. However, I reflected on the need to sustain the mission of the Caravan. Organizing workshops for teachers may not be enough and sustainable. There is a need to work with the leadership of the Department of Education, for example, to ensure institutionalization of training programs on *inclusive education for children with disabilities*. Furthermore, in the community level, schools do not exist in isolation from the community. Hence, engaging with community officials and members in promoting inclusive education is critical.

As mentioned, this is the reason why this year, the Inclusion Caravan has gone beyond organizing capacity building workshops for teachers. The Luncheon Meeting with the leadership of the Department of Education and Teacher Education Institutions aimed at articulating the need to institutionalize or strengthen the introduction of inclusive education for children with disabilities. Institutionalization may mean that inclusive education should not be perceived as an after thought, but a critical and essential component of Teacher Education curriculum. Furthermore, the Community Meetings, #DrawDisability, and Tri-Media Exposure hoped at raising the awareness of the community about disability rights and education. As mentioned, schools exist as part of a bigger community. Hence, the promotion of inclusive education requires the engagement of the schools and the community.

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4. Recommendations moving forward

Building on my experiences in doing the Inclusion Caravan this year, I would like to share the following recommendations moving forward.

For Inclusion Caravan

1. Continue the conversations with the teachers on *inclusive education for children with disabilities*. This may be done through different platforms. One is to encourage participants to sign up for the Weekend Chat on Inclusive Education (<http://www.globi-observatory.org/a-weekend-chat-on-inclusive-education/>), a cost-free online platform for teachers to discuss their experiences in working with children with disabilities in general education settings. Other ways such as continued conduct of in-person workshops and mentorship may also be considered through identified pool of experts in certain areas.
2. Initiate the discussion about the possibility of organizing the Inclusion Caravan for 2019 including the plan for Inclusive Education Conference in Dumaguete City and San Carlos City next year.

For Department of Education in the Negros Island

1. Institutionalize the inclusion of the topic on *inclusive education for children with disabilities* in Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions as well as in In-Service Training (INSET)
2. Encourage special education teachers to provide systemic support to mainstream teachers especially those accommodating children with disabilities in their classrooms. Support may take in the form of support groups where teachers meet to discuss their experiences in accommodating children with disabilities.

For Teacher Education Institutions

1. Encourage the conduct of studies regarding inclusive education for children with disabilities especially within the context of Teacher Education. In this way, pieces of evidence will be made available to further advocate for *inclusive education for children with disabilities*.
2. Seek expertise in thinking through how the subject on 'Foundations of Special and Inclusive Education' will be implemented in the Teacher Education curriculum specifically in terms of contents. It is critical that this subject should not only be a platform to acquire skills, but also to shift paradigms about disability and inclusion.

For the Community

1. Advocate for the utilization of allocated budget for persons with disabilities (1 per cent alongside Senior Citizens) every year. The budget may be used to fund disability-driven activities.
2. Organize activities geared towards raising the awareness of the community about disability rights and education.
3. Include discussions on disability rights and education in tri-media platforms: radio, print, and TV.