

***Appreciating Inclusive Education:
A Regular Classroom Experience in the Philippines***

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Abstract

The art of teaching well necessitates constant tuning in with the changing times. To thrive as a teacher, I need to be constantly updated and mindful of the philosophical thoughts behind the changes to anchor my pedagogical approach. One recent challenge requiring special attention is inclusive education. After teaching for more than two decades, I am a witness to how my school, De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde, readily adapts to current and post-modern thoughts in education. Inclusive education has become increasingly manifested in the evolved programs, courses and schools, and the student profile. My academic interest in philosophy of education enables me to rationalize the flow of changes as I continually explore innovative, creative, multi-intelligence, multi- and interdisciplinary approaches in the classroom. In this paper, I share my practice in teaching and learning as I handle increasingly diverse students. I briefly describe my philosophy of education, primary methodology, and support strategies and activities that enable me to flexibly respond to my students' needs. Given the inclusivity challenge, my goal is not only to accommodate their special needs and varied learning styles, but, more importantly, to harness their diversity as an add-on to their total learning experience. This outlook makes me see the added learning opportunity and positivizes my attitude towards accommodating students with special learning needs in my regular classes. I join colleagues who assert that inclusive education may appear daunting, but it is necessary and doable.

Keywords: Inclusive education, philosophy of education, pedagogy, classroom accommodation

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Introduction

It is my duty, as a teacher, to be constantly updated and mindful of the challenges, trends and changes in educational policies or thoughts. This is necessary to attune, re-appropriate, and enhance my art in pedagogy. One of the challenges now in the Philippines is in stepping up the implementation of inclusive education. In De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde (DLS-CSB), the Center for Inclusive Education Office (DLS-CSB brochures 2017), was recently set-up in line with this policy direction. This paper is my initiative to share my thoughts and classroom experiences on inclusive education. I researched on the topic from the pragmatic philosophical worldview. It is a pragmatic as it focuses on a real-world topic with the end of improving real life practice. It is qualitative as it is exploratory and narrative in approach (John W. Creswell, 2014). It would be my contribution to the community of learners as I anticipate the need to mainstream inclusive education in more classrooms, or even in more schools.

In the Philippines, there are few documentations that will aid those who have not experienced handling students with special learning needs in regular classes. And the few, like me, who have experienced it are still beginners. Most of us are searching for relevant experiences to deepen our understanding and to improve on our approach to students with special learning needs. Through this study, I intend to flag down lessons and areas of concern as I experienced them in the classroom. My desire to synthesize my experiences and systematize my thoughts on the matter are both personal-oriented and community-centered. It is personal in the sense that it will aid me to better communicate my learnings and insights as I collaborate with other school units and authorities in charge of implementing inclusive philosophy of education in the classroom. It is also community-oriented in the sense that this will be my means of sharing insights with co-teachers who are either openly resistant, open but feel unprepared simply because they lack the experience, or those who have some experience but are looking for alternatives and affirmation to their practice. My classroom experience is especially shared for teachers who are interested in contextual discussions and narratives in inclusive education.

Education for All

The call for inclusive education is one of the extensions of the visionary global agenda “education for all” or EFA, mostly expressed in various United Nations documents. The preamble of the World Education Forum (WEF) 2015’s Incheon Declaration states: “We reaffirm the vision of the worldwide movement for Education for All initiated in Jomtien in 1990...however, we recognize with great concern that we are far from having reached education for all” (p.1).

The Incheon Declaration serves as a unifying guidepost that drums up support to inclusive education. Below is an excerpt from the formulated education vision for 2030 (WEF2015, p.1):

Our vision is to transform lives through education, ... We commit with a sense of urgency to a single, renewed education agenda that is holistic, ambitious and aspirational, leaving no one behind. This new vision is fully captured by the proposed sustainable development goal

(SDG) 4 “*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all*” ... It is transformative and universal, attends to the ‘unfinished business’ of the EFA agenda ... inspired by a humanistic vision of education and development based on human rights and dignity; social justice; inclusion; protection; cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity; and shared responsibility and accountability.... education is a public good, a fundamental human right and a basis for guaranteeing the realization of other rights. It is essential for peace, tolerance, human fulfilment and sustainable development. We recognize education as key to achieving full employment and poverty eradication. We will focus our efforts on access, equity and inclusion, quality and learning outcomes, within a lifelong learning approach.

Some relevant policy references for Philippine schools are quite dated but are also attuned to inclusive education. This quotation from a UNESCO-funded book project headed by Lourdes A. Quisumbing and Felice P. Sta. Maria (1996, p. xi) points to the values expected among teachers:

Education for tolerance should aim at countering influences that lead to fear and exclusion of others, and should help young people to develop capacities for independent judgment, critical thinking, and ethical reasoning.

In the book, one would find lengthy discussions in the spirit of promoting education for all. I quote here an example (p. 29):

Values education at the tertiary level introduces human rights and a commitment to peace as values for interpersonal and intrapersonal growth. Tolerance is introduced through the components of human rights, peace education, and internationalism.

Current teachers are graduates of college and graduate programs not designed to cater to persons with disabilities (PWDs), and persons with special learning needs. However, “education for all” has been the commonly accepted direction within the United Nations, of which the Philippines is an active member. If humanitarian values have been successfully communicated and were imbibed by the now senior faculty members, they could still be expected to have the proper predisposition to take on the challenge of adapting the principles of inclusive education.

Still, written work on Philippine efforts and experiences in inclusive education in the classroom could hardly be found. Available books on the topic are largely from the United States of America and some from Asian countries. Most of them describe experiences in basic education and very few focus on its implementation on the tertiary level. I also noted that most of them feature a compilation of experiences that require collaborative efforts. I am referring to literary works such as those of Levan Lim and Marilyn Mayling Quah (2004), Margo A. Mastropiere and Thomas E. Scruggs (2004), Spencer J. Salend (2008), and Richard A. Villa and Jacqueline S. Thousand (1995). My aim is to add to the literature on Philippine classroom experience in the college level.

De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde in Manila, Philippines

DLS-CSB is one of the pioneers in the Philippines when it comes to accommodating students with special learning needs in college. Its School of Deaf Education and Applied Studies (SDEAS) is an offshoot of a program for persons with hearing disabilities. In recent years, more students with visual and orthopedic impairments, learning disabilities and autism have been participating in varied regular courses (Rappler, 2017). In the current Student Handbook, the school's breakthrough goals for the inclusion agenda says, "By 2020, 30% of our student population would be comprised of those who are economically disadvantaged, PWDs, and may have special learning needs" (p. 22).

"Inclusive education" has only been recently articulated in the DLS-CSB official documents, but the spirit of inclusivity has long been in its practiced institutional values, expressed in different words from its inception in the 1980s. Multiple intelligences, learner-centered education, creativity and innovation, and now inclusion, all had their turn being expressed in the school's vision and mission statements. The school's current vision-mission statement says: "De la Salle-College of Saint Benilde is committed to building a just and humane society by being at the forefront of innovative education that is accessible to the poor and diversely-gifted learners."

To be "appreciative of individual worth" is one of the Benildean expressions of the Lasallian core values. The Student Handbook 2016-19 further explains that "to be appreciative of individual worth means recognizing each person's inherent value by embracing diversity, respecting each one's uniqueness and contributing to creating a culture of inclusion" (p. 26, emphasis added).

Benilde's educational Philosophy, as printed in its Student Handbook 2016-2019 (p. 22) expresses the following:

... each student is unique and endowed by God with talents and gifts that should be understood, appreciated, and nurtured...

... promotes innovations through learner-centered teaching methodologies grounded on Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences.

Inclusive education comes as a natural extension of the learner-centered philosophy of education espoused by the school. To illustrate, I quote here the discussion on learner-centered education in the past DLS-CSB Faculty Manual (2013-16, p. 8):

Learner-centered education operates according to what is known about the individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) and the learning process (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs including effective teaching practices that promote the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners); and applying the knowledge to improve practice.

The principles of inclusivity have been in place and have long been communicated to all members of the learning community. Dr. Catherine Deen, director of the school’s Center for Inclusive Education (CIE), noted significant preparations and procedural adjustments in the school towards pushing for inclusive education, as cited by Patty Passion in her recent Rappler article (2017).

Inclusive education has long been a challenge from the point of view of governments and school administrators, but it remains an emerging task requiring clarity in scope and demands from the regular teachers’ point of view. The “lack of willingness among teachers to teach PWDs, students concealing their condition, and failure to get employment after college,” were among those identified by Dr. Deen as remaining challenges. And she surmised that most higher educational institutions are in similar state.

Philosophy of Education

My academic interest in philosophy of education enables me to appreciate the series of changes in the school educational thrusts. As a faculty member for 24 years, I am a witness to how my school readily embraces current and post-modern thoughts in philosophy of education: individually-guided program, multiple intelligences, learner-centered education, creativity and innovation, and now inclusion, all found their way in the institution’s vision and mission statements. These thoughts got expressed in evolving courses and programs as well as changing student profiles, to name a few. The institution’s responsiveness to the needs of the community is conditioned by the school’s philosophical orientation. In my dissertation, I have established the pragmatism in DLS-CSB’s philosophy of education (Macaranas, 2000). In subsequent studies, I have ascertained that the constant adaptation of the school is in fact a manifestation of its pragmatism (Macaranas, 2008, 2017). This responsiveness to the industry could be the main factor why the school is expanding and thriving.

DLS-CSB’s Steps in Inclusive Education

DLS-CSB’s focus in inclusive education is to respond to the needs of these groups: 1) Learners with special education needs; 2) Learners on financial assistance; 3) Learners on talent scholarships; and 4) Learners from indigenous peoples. The first group, the learners with special needs, are classified according to the following categories: Learners with Special Learning Needs (SLN); Learners with Psychological and/or Emotional Needs (PEN); and (3) Learners with Physical Disabilities (PD).

Table 1. Descriptions of Special Needs Categories

Categories	Description
Special Learning Needs (SLN)	Students who have disclosed conditions supported by appropriate diagnostic and medical documents related to neurodevelopmental disorders including but not limited to intellectual Disabilities (ID), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Specific Learning Disorders (SLD).
Psychological and/or	Students who have disclosed conditions supported by appropriate diagnostic and medical documents related to psychological and

Emotional Needs (PEN)	emotional conditions including but not limited to Depressive Disorders (DD), Anxiety Disorders (AD), Obsessive-Compulsive and related Disorders (OCD), and Bipolar and Related Disorders (BP).
Physical Disabilities (PD)*	Students who have disclosed conditions supported by appropriate diagnostic and medical documents related to physical disabilities including but not limited to those with visual impairments, physical disabilities, motor disorders, and hard of hearing.
<i>* Note. Deaf learners enrolled in the School of Deaf Education and applied Studies (SDEAS) are covered by the policies and programs under the SDEAS and other Schools, Centers and Offices serving them. P. 7</i>	

In a seminar on inclusive education organized by Special Education Network in Asia (SENIA) on 17 March 2018 at the British School Manila, it was explained that to be fully inclusive, a school must institutionalize course accommodations and modifications. Accommodations are catch up or helping measures given without changing the learning objectives and coverage of the subject. All students learn the same content and hurdle common learning objectives, but some are allowed added learning and demonstration strategies. Modifications are bigger steps in inclusive education as it involves changes in academic content and learning expectations. While accommodations could be extended to any student, modifications could be granted only to students clinically diagnosed with special learning needs. It is important for said modifications to be formalized in the course description and to be accurately reflected in course title on transcript.

DLS-CSB already made strides in terms of classroom accommodation and providing out-of-classroom learning support services, including enrolment accommodations, special classes, and case management. Students with special needs may avail of appropriate classroom accommodations as part of their learning support. This could include preferential seating; advance copy of notes; rest periods; audio or video recording of lectures; extension time on assessments and assignments; and/or bringing a personal assistant. They are encouraged to communicate with their instructors about their conditions and unique needs through their Approved Accommodations Form (AAF) issued by CIE.

My Inclusive Classroom Experiences

I teach philosophy and theology. And my students come from any of the school's regular courses such as bachelor of science courses information system or bachelor of arts courses in hotel, restaurant and institutional management, real estate management, or consular and diplomatic affairs.

I describe here my primary methodology that enable me to accommodate the learners given their circumstances. A classroom session usually runs for 1½ hours. I always open with a prayer and learning objectives to contextualize the class. Then I teach using my interactive lecture approach. I always put effort in ensuring that my lectures are characteristically content-oriented, attention-seeking, and encouraging of reflective inquiry and enthusiastic exchange of ideas and experiences. Lectures are ideally followed by assessment activities to check understanding and to encourage discipline. But assessment activities may be skipped in some meetings. Standard

closing consists of processing, a summary of the lesson, and lastly, a prayer. My previous works have more detailed discussions on my pedagogical approach. Table 2 below represents in brief my flexible classroom format with estimated time allocation for each part described.

Table 2. My Flexible Class Format

Flow Guide: <i>OTAP</i>	Description by Part	Time Allocation in 1 ½ Hours
Open Establish Learning Context	Opening Prayer Learning Objectives Prior Knowledge and Review	5 minutes
Teach with <u>CARE</u>:	Lecture Using Socratic method	At least 30 minutes
Content-oriented <u>Attention-seeking</u> <u>Reflection-inspiring</u> <u>Enthusiastic-sharing</u>	Interaction and reflective exchanges Example student activities: Think-pair-share, case analysis, role playing, games	20-30 minutes
Assess	Learning Evaluation Exercises, Seat work activities, Reflections, Tests, Essays, Quizzes	15-25 minutes
Process	Processing Closing Prayer (Integration)	5-10 minutes

Given the inclusivity challenge, my goal is not only to accommodate special needs and varied learning styles of students, but, more importantly, to harness their diversity as an add-on to their total learning experience. This outlook makes me see the added learning opportunity and positivizes my attitude towards accommodating students with special learning needs in my regular classes. The following are some cases I handled in my classroom in the last 3 years of teaching. Identity of students are withheld to respect their privacy.

Student 1 slowly lost his eyesight in high school until it was totally lost while in college. He sat in the front row. He struck me as a very promising student with above average intelligence, drive to learn and performance. He took special tests using Braille or the computer. He was mostly independent, only needing help when walking. Classmates helped him.

Student 2 was blind since birth. He became my student two times: first in philosophy then in religion. He was very independent, needing no assistance in navigating the campus, and no special seat. I remember him as a critical thinker, always asking a lot of questions. He took texts using Braille or the computer. He graduated and is now gainfully working.

Student 3 was a rare case of undisclosed psychological and/or emotional need. Facing teenage pregnancy issues among others, she manifested extra sensitivity and chronic behavioral problem in most of her classes. She frequently visited or got invited for

counselling. Teachers accommodated her with extra dose of leniency, upon parents' request or demand.

Students 1, 2 and 3 were few of the earlier cases before the CIE formalized the school's learning support and referral system using the Approved Accommodations Form (AAF). Prior to this, I usually got an oral notice from our supervisor before classes started. I also received solicited or unsolicited help from guidance counsellors or discipline officers. Even without notice, I never turned down any student who came to my class. I encountered the next set of students more recently. These I handled, already aided by the AAF prepared by the CIE, which the students may or may not disclose to me.

Student A was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). According to his AAF, he could: sit in front of the class; be given feedback at least once a week; be given deadline extensions; be allowed voice recording; and/or be given up to 20% extension of testing time upon professor's discretion.

Student B was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). His AAF stated that he be allowed: to be seated in front of the class; voice recording; up to 20% extension of testing time; advanced resources; and/or alternative outputs when necessary, and upon consultation with professor and case manager.

Student C's AAF said he was diagnosed of ADHD. His list of approved accommodations said he could: be seated in front of the class; be allowed recording; have weekly consultations; be given resources in advance; up to 20% extension of testing time; utilize computer to type answer instead of writing on paper for essays during an exam or test; have an academic buddy to help particularly in his Filipino subject.

Student D was also diagnosed with ADHD. His AAF list was shorter, which said that he could: be seated in front of the class; be given feedback at least weekly; and be allowed to submit alternative outputs as found necessary upon consultation with professor and case manager.

Most of them submitted their AAF during the first few sessions, but one of them hesitated until about the middle of the term. Being voluntary, it is possible that I am not aware of the others. I found the referral system very helpful. Once disclosed, I gave the students special importance and extra time. I consciously adjusted my lectures without sacrificing the content and the rest of the class. My flexible class format and my interactive lecture allowed me to respond to them all. I subscribe to the popular dictum that "If they don't learn the way I teach, then I should teach the way they learn." Everyone successfully finished the class requirements.

Conclusion

Faculty members must be quick to take stock of changes, adopt, and re-tool, if necessary. Being aware of one's philosophy of education is a good way to remain internally coherent throughout the changes in educational calls of the time. Ideally, faculty members and educators must be aware of the different philosophies of education; and supervisors and administrators must orient and prepare faculty

members for upcoming challenges. To readily embrace inclusive education requires significant internal preparedness.

Philosophically, our school remains focused on its vision, stays in the same mission, and observes the same philosophy by keeping its programs responsive. My pedagogical mindset given DLS-CSB's learner-centeredness and my pedagogical approach in handling diverse learners conditioned me to accommodate learners with special learning needs. However, awareness of the school philosophy and long-term exposure in the institution is not enough. As indicated by some colleague's hesitation to accommodate students with pronounced special learning needs points to the need for deeper philosophical orientation. To thrive and positively participate in promoting inclusive education, teachers must be truly open to ideas and learn continuously. I remain grounded, by being aware of the school philosophy, my philosophy of education, and my practice. I find it necessary to self-examine and philosophize about my own work: document it, research on it, and write about it. We must be abreast on trends, issues, thoughts in pedagogy, the youth of today, school management approaches, and new ways of approaching learners. As educators, we must familiarize ourselves on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Psychological and/or Emotional Needs (PEN), and all conditions requiring special classroom accommodation. Actively participating in conferences can help.

The whole school's readiness and support cannot be over-emphasized. Schools must put up: 1) programs and supportive protocols in handling learners with special needs, and, 2) clear policies stating responsibilities of stakeholders in the learning community. Disclosure and arrangement on special learning needs help teachers prepare and respond to the learner's needs or preferences. Non-disclosure must be discouraged. It can be disruptive, lead to risky situations, and/or put the teacher in a tight spot. I strongly recommend expressing measures protecting the faculty from unnecessary burden or liability arising from "mishandling" undisclosed conditions of students at risk.

It is a fact that denial or stigma make some parents and students opt for non-disclosure. On a daily basis, with or without institutional support, for teachers to thrive in inclusive education, we need to be always attentive and responsive to each student's reactions and behaviour in the classroom. Inclusivity is a growing challenge to me as a teacher. But since I see my teaching career as a calling, I will always remain fulfilled, responsive, adaptable, and open to ideas.

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