

The Road Not Taken: Life of Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSENs) After Elementary Education

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Abstract: Elementary education is the foundation of lifelong learning and personal development of every learner. This qualitative study aims to explore the lived inspiring experiences of learners with special educational needs (LSENs) after finishing their elementary education, specifically Grade 6 level. It used qualitative-phenomenological approach. Despite the implementation of inclusive education in the Philippines to acquire equal educational rights for all learners, LSENs are included as candidates for bullying and at risk of dropping out. This is due to some underlying challenges like the severity of their disability, financial status of their parents and the availability of accommodations in school. The study revealed that the 3 key informants were able to continue their studies after graduating Grade 6 in some schools in Benguet and Baguio City because of their innate strong determination to finish their studies. They urge to improve the quality of their own life. Moreover, the effective collaboration among teachers, families and other support services is the forefront in cultivating and guiding LSENs to strive in their academics successfully. This study contributes on the positive outlook in supporting LSENs to pursue higher educational attainment after Grade 6. It negates the traditional mindset that they should stay at home only since they can't survive in school. It advocates for more development of the school system to support diverse learners most specially these kind of learners also.

Keywords: Learners with Special Education Needs; LSENs; elementary; disability; inclusive education

INTRODUCTION

The right to education is a fundamental one. The Philippine Constitution of 1987 Article XIV defines in detail the right of every individual to high-quality education across the board. It follows that education is a right for all citizens, including those with disabilities. Disability means (1) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more psychological, physiological or anatomical function of an individual or activities of such individual; (2) a record of such an impairment; or (3) being regarded as having such an impairment (Magna Carta for Disabled Persons, n.d). The Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) also issues the policy guideline on the Provision of Educational Programs and Services for Learners with Disabilities in the K to 12 Basic Education Program known as DepEd ORDER No. 44, s.

2021. Recently the term “persons with disabilities (PWD)” was replaced into “learners with special educational needs (LSENs)”. It promotes acknowledging the person courteously first before their disabilities.

Basic education is intended to meet basic learning needs which provides the foundation on which subsequent learning can be based (Republic Act No. 10533, 2013). In the Philippines, this encompasses at least one year of kindergarten, six years of elementary and six years of secondary education as well as alternative learning systems for out-of-school learners and those with special needs. Internationally, UNESCO (2012) states that basic education corresponds to the first nine years of formal schooling and is made up of two levels. Level 1 is primary education; usually six years

and Level 2 refers to lower secondary; usually three years. It also covers non-formal and informal activities intended to meet the basic learning needs of people of all ages. Moreover, the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities (n.d.), as amended, emphasizes that persons with disabilities are part of Philippine society and have the same rights as other people to take their proper place in society. Since there were estimated 1.3 billion people – about 16% of the global population – currently experience significant disability (WHO, 2020). Their rights must never be perceived as welfare services by the government. It further obliges the state to adopt policies ensuring the rehabilitation, self-development, and self-reliance of persons with disabilities and to develop their skills and potentials to enable them to compete favorably for available opportunities. This is also mandated by the Philippines Republic Act No. 11650 (2022) instituting a policy of inclusion and services for learners with disabilities in support of inclusive education, establishing inclusive learning resource centers of learners with disabilities in all school districts, municipalities and cities, providing for standards, appropriating funds and for other purposes that 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. The severity of the disability of these LSENs, their different ethnicity, beliefs and origins should all be considered unbiased in the classroom. Additionally, as education fosters employment, it is essential to societal development opportunity, the productivity of the country and values.

Nowadays the numbers of LSENs that were successfully transitioned in higher education are significantly increasing because of inclusive education. Thus, school needs to continue looking for effective ways in recognizing and accommodating the diverse needs of these LSENs at a young age. This will help their transition from primary to secondary to tertiary and even post tertiary level so they can function independently on the latter part of their lives. For people with disabilities this kind of transition is often very difficult, due to several limitations

imposed by others view of disability and by the complexity of the services intended to support this transition (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007).

Despite of the numerous laws that mandates education for all, most of the public schools and private schools here in the Philippines faces various challenges in supporting the learning of LSENs. Durian & Perena (2022) found out the lack of facilities, policies and student support services that will cater the needs of the students with disabilities in the HEIs (Higher Education Institution) or college level. They also cited that around only 6% persons with disabilities were able to finish college degree. These indicate also that Philippines needs to continue improving its educational system. It should utilize the set targets and indicators of the worldwide 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) specifically goals number 4, 8 and 10. Goal number 4 focuses on “quality education” wherein it ensures inclusive education, equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Goal number 8 focuses on the “decent work and economic growth” wherein it promotes sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. Lastly, goal number 10 focuses on the “reduced inequalities” wherein it reduces inequality within and among countries to empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.

In general, it can be said that utmost school provisions for the young LSENs during their transitions leads to successfully getting a degree in college. The unending family support for them improves quality of life also. Supporting the shift from education to the workplace is a widely utilized concept that was primarily developed and implemented by the educational institutions. The goal is to facilitate LSENs movement between the two surroundings. They will be prepared with the needed skills and values for future employment and even surviving independently on their adulthood. However, there are limited studies that display the real life of LSENs after finishing their elementary education in the

Philippines. Thus, the purpose of this research is to determine the lived educational pathways of these LSENs after graduating in Grade 6 level.

Problem Statement:

The purpose of this qualitative-phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSENs) after finishing their basic education.

Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study applied a qualitative-phenomenological approach. Phenomenological deals with the lived experiences of an individual. Phenomenology hold the view that human beings extract meaning from the world through personal experience (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Same study cited that investigating the experience of individuals is a highly complex phenomenon: annotating and clarifying human experience can be a challenging task not only because of the complexity of human nature, but also because an individual's experience is a multidimensional phenomenon, that is, psychologically oriented, culturally driven, and socially structured.

3.2. Ethical Consideration

In conducting the study, the researchers made written consent letters that were addressed to the school administrator and to the parent/guardian of the key informants that allow the researchers to conduct the interview. The researchers ensure that data gathered during the study will remain confidential and results would be used merely for educational purposes.

3.3. Sampling Procedures

The key informants were chosen through criterion sampling. The core criteria for participation in the study included

learners with special educational needs (LSENs) that were able to finish their basic education, specifically Grade 6 in the Philippines.

3.4. Participants

The key informants of the study were three (3) LSENs that were able to finish their basic education, specifically Grade 6 in some schools here in Benguet and Baguio City. They are comprised of 2 boys and 1 girl.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Graduate of Grade 6	Graduate from Alternative Learning System
Learners with ASD, ADHD, ID, LD, orthopedic disability and emotional disability	Learners who are with hearing impairment and visual impairment

3.5. Instrument

A semi-structured interview is used for data gathering of this study. Contextual analysis of answers from the three key informants were generated.

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the data gathered from the interview conducted among the three learners with special educational needs who were selected as key informants based on some inclusion criteria. *The findings of the study reflected that they have some similar experiences and different views*

Positive experiences

Inclusive education is now widely implemented and experienced by the key informants who were still attending school in secondary and tertiary level. They were given the needed accommodations to learn together with the regular students in general education

classrooms. The study of Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan (2016) showed that the support in inclusive classroom should possess effective interaction with general education teachers, sped teachers and students with adapted special teaching competencies that cater successfully to the needs of children with special needs. This reflects on the answers of the key informants which states that “During our C.A.T (Citizens Army Training) and P.E (Physical Education) courses, my teacher gives me exception to just sit if they are having exercises or running activities because I cannot perform it due to my physical disability”, “My teachers give me some extra activities that helps me improve my basic skills like reading and mathematics” and “My instructors give me extended time in submitting my school requirements like projects”.

Moreover, their family is the primary source for moral encouragement and financial support. Having a developed positive outlook in life and eagerness to be successful in the future made them overcome the different challenges that they encountered at a young age. This reflects on the answers of the key informants which states that “If you want something you should be well determined in achieving it, don’t mind what other people say and focus on your studies because nothing can take it away from you”, “Always believe that you can do it even if you are not good in academics you can excel in other areas like your talent” and “Life is hard but don’t give up and we need to try our very best not only for ourselves but for our love ones like for me, it’s for my younger brother and parents who are getting older already”. The three LSENs also wanted to finish their studies and pursue their dream jobs to live independently in the future just like any person.

One of the key informant was able to benefit from therapy since her family can afford it. This focuses on speech which enhances the LSENs ability to say clearer sounds of every words and express her thoughts confidently. This reflects on the answer of the key informant which states that “I’m not shy in talking with my friends and it’s easier for me to communicate with my family and other people because I don’t need to repeat

myself every now and then”. Proper pausing and intonations were also taught to her during the sessions since she can communicate verbally.

Negative Experiences

Most of our key informants did not receive any accommodations in school on their lower grade levels. The concept of special education isn’t yet well known and practiced here in the country. There was no available or limited access only of special education teachers locally and internationally. General education teachers weren’t trained to cater the unique needs of these LSENs also. According DepEd (2009), special education in the Philippines has only served 2% of the targeted 2.2 million children with disabilities in the country who live without access to a basic human right. This reflects on the answers of the key informants which states that “I did not receive any accommodation during my elementary education because I accomplish the same activities, projects and exams given to the regular learners”.

The three key informants of this study had been bullied in school. Even though it focuses on verbal bullying only, it had a great negative impact on them. They encountered self-pity, think that they are treated unfairly and opt to drop from school at some point of their life. Saia, et al. (2009) cited on their study that previous studies found higher rates of bullying experienced by children with special needs and have explored specific personal characteristics that might make a person with special needs more vulnerable to being a target for bullying (e.g. differences in appearance, speech difficulties, social skill deficits, difficulty cognitive processing of events). Base from the survey of Philippine Statistic Authority (2018) also, about 8% of the estimated 39.2 million Filipinos aged 6 to 24 years have disability that shows the main reason for not attending school.

Conclusion

This study reveals that LSENs are more determined, self-reliant and resilient to finish their studies so that they can improve the quality of their own life. They use the challenges that

they encountered in school as a motivating force to succeed in their education. Each LSENs were given the opportunity to study in an inclusive classroom set-up in Baguio City and in Benguet despite their varied disabilities. Vistar et al. (2024) affirms that success has been observed among learners with special needs in schools in different parts of the country, including the SPED center in Balamban, Cebu currently. The established active alliances of the whole community of every LSENs that includes their parents, teachers, therapists and other support system resulted to their holistic development. Thus, DepEd should monitor closely the proper implementations of inclusive education in all schools and follows the different laws that that supports the learning of these LSENs. PDAO (Persons with Disabilities Affairs Office) in Benguet and Baguio City must assure representation of PWDs in local development council meetings and other relevant bodies, facilitates broader dissemination of information on programs and activities for PWDs and promotes training and employment opportunities (Bustillo, 2024). Ensuring a quality education for all results to the productive employment and even having a decent job for LSENs in their adulthood.

Recommendation

Life is a continuous learning process that we can't stop once we achieve something. Achieving means nothing when we don't know how to live independently. Being dependent on oneself is one achievement that LSENs may attain for a lifetime. Setting goals in life is one of your foundation for you to be successful. Please consider that we can't always depend on the people around us. As the saying goes everything can be learned. Never stop on learning something you know that you can benefit from it. When the day ends, we are still the ones who are responsible for our future.

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