

Providers' Perspective of Special Education for Children

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Abstract

All children are entitled to educational rights in accordance to the international treaties (Convention on the Rights of the Child) and national laws of the Philippines. However, children with special needs usually do not receive these basic rights because of structural and political conditions. Therefore, this study focuses on the provision of education to children with special needs in a government operated school in a city of central Philippines. Specifically, this aims to describe the current services of a special education center, the involvement of its stakeholders in the development of children, challenges in their service provision; and their recommendations for program development. The study utilized a descriptive qualitative design through a key informant interview utilizing an interview guide. A total of eight informants were interviewed and selected through purposive sampling with selection criteria of a) providing direct child development services to students and b) teaching for at least 1 year in the school. Findings of the study provided basic demographic profiles of the teachers who are mostly female, married and between 21 to 53 years old with an average age of 38. The service was described by the kind of service, materials provided and development conditions being catered for. In addition, the support of the teacher, parents and the government were described. These highlight the challenges in the provision of special education in areas of assessment and diagnosis, instruction, parents' involvement,

physical set-up and educational materials. Recommendations were then made regarding how to further their service provision. In conclusion, children have not received full access to due to social and attitudinal problems. Additionally, almost all kinds of development conditions were catered for; hindrances were noted in areas of structure, instruction and attitude, which could be highlighted for program development.

Keywords: Community Participation in SPED, Inclusive Education, Program Development for Special Education

Introduction

Special education programs in the Philippines started more than a century ago (Camara, 2003). Throughout the years, many models of special education programs have been implemented in the country. Some of these are: special education center, special day school, resource room plan and others. These happened because of progressive development in the Philippine Education System through initiation of reforms such as the Governance of Basic Education Act 2001, Philippine Plan of Action for Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons 2003-2012 and Philippine Education for All 2015 National Action Plan, to name a few. These reforms resulted in the Department of Education issuing Department Orders, which led to the enhancement of education centers, provision of an early education program, teachers' education and training, improving

curriculum, community and parental involvement, early childhood care and education, and others (DepEd, 2004). These areas defined the main project of the Education Sector-Inclusive Education (IE) project (DepEd, 2009). With the advent of all of those reforms, studies to review existing services are necessary for evaluation. With that, this study supports qualitative review of an existing center.

Objectives

This study's objective was to gather providers' perspectives in delivering education to children with special needs in a city of central Philippines. Further, this study aimed to evaluate the service of a government school to determine the possible improvement of services towards a multi-sectoral collaboration, and specifically to describe the current services that the center is offering, identify areas of involvement of teachers, parents and community in a center, recognize challenges in areas of instruction, assessment and parents involvement; and identify recommendations of the providers to improve their services.

Methods

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative design through face to face in-depth interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data from the key informants and they were identified through purposive sampling. Only eight providers qualified in the criteria inclusions, i.e. a teacher who is in the school for at least one year to provide a direct service to children with special needs. Each informant was interviewed from 30 minutes to one hour. This method was used to understand more deeply the structure and flow of the service delivery based on the perspective of the providers for further improvement of the service (USAID, 1996). The interview guide has four areas: profiling of teachers, students and services; defining responsibilities of teacher, parents and community; challenges in

teaching and instruction, assessment and parents' involvement; and teachers' recommendations. Based on the profile of the teachers, all of them were female, mostly married (n=7) and with an average age of 38 years old (max=53 and min=21). Two of them were full SPED teachers and six were receiving teachers. Additionally, one of them had finished a baccalaureate degree, three had Master's Degrees in SPED and four had Master's Degrees in Education/Management.

Results

Profiling of teachers, students and services

The conditions of children with special needs being catered by the center include children with intellectual disabilities (autism and mental retardation), learning disabilities, behavioral problems (ADHD) and physical disabilities (hearing, communication and visual impairment). Understanding the current school system, these students were catered by the teachers and then transferred to receiving regular teachers, if the child achieved a level where they could be integrated into mainstream education. No child with special needs was denied entry to the school. The teachers provide different forms of teaching and learning activities including academic lectures based on grade level, play and arts activities, academic tutorials, life skills and socialization training, and basic speech therapy. These were provided utilizing different instructional and teaching materials including audio-visual equipment, writing and reading materials, Braille, manipulative toys, therapy balls, brushes and other art materials.

Responsibilities

Based on the results, there were three areas in which teachers are providing for the children. These were in areas of cognition, life skills and psycho-socio-spiritual. For cognitive development, teachers utilized different tools and techniques

to facilitate learning, such as reading and basic counting. For life skills training, the students were trained in basic hygiene practices and communication skills. Additionally, teachers provided students with skills to protect themselves from bullying and discrimination. Children in an inclusive classroom setting experienced bullying from classmates. This was coherent with the results of a study in Hong Kong which found that children with developmental problems usually experienced problems with peers (Wong, 2002). In contrast, a study in Malaysia stated that parents were more positive about the social benefits, attitudes and treatment in an inclusive classroom setting (Jelas, 2000). Lastly, most of the teachers identified psychological, social and spiritual developments as important aspects in the children's development. They provided values education and social adjustment in their situations. They also taught their students how to pray and provided them with love and motherly care. On the other hand, teachers identified several areas where parents could help their children. Firstly, parents need to accept the condition of their children. Most of the parents do not accept it and tend not to be cooperative with the teachers. They deny that their children have special needs to be addressed. This leads to the children dropping out of schools or their intermittent attendance of classes. Another identified area was the willingness of the parents. Acceptance was identified as the first step that leads to willingness to let their child undergo a special education program. This was one of the identified indicators of educational participation in a study conducted in Kenya by Mutua (2001). The study focused on the involvement of parents in the success of the education program for children with mental retardation. This entails continuous and sustained support from the parents by sending their children to school and by providing other needed assessments. Lastly, teachers identified that training and education should be continued

in children's homes. Those things being practiced in schools should also be taught and practiced in their homes. This is one of the usual expectations of teachers from parents in a school setting (Dela Torre, 1995; Sandoval, 2001). This avoids confusion among children and learning is sustained. Support from the community was also identified by the teachers as contributing to the children's development and came from government, private and non-government organizations. Government organizations providing support are the Department of Education, Social Welfare Agency and Charity Sweepstakes Office. Private sector and non-government organizations provided reading glasses, books and braille.

Challenges

Teachers provided their insights into the challenges they had experienced, and these were clustered into three domains: teaching and instruction, assessment, and parents' involvement. In the areas of teaching, three themes were highlighted. One of these was physical condition, with identified challenges of small classroom size, and a long distance to school from the child's home. This was coherent with the finding of Camara (2003) that most special education centers are located in urban areas. Children living far from schools or urban areas, experience difficulties in accessing educational centers. Another theme was the social and economical conditions wherein challenges were the attitude of other students to children with special needs and lack of financial capacity of some parents to support their children. Lastly in the teaching domain was instruction wherein lack of equipment/materials and training were identified. In a study conducted in Israel, teachers identified that they needed further training for special education and acquisition of tools for teaching (Heiman, 2001). Another domain was assessment. Before children can be accepted in the special

class programs, they need proper assessment to diagnose their conditions. Teachers identified school and family related challenges as hindrances to progress of the children. As for school-related challenges, school facilities for developmental assessment, lack of teachers for screening children, lack of screening materials, and limited training in identifying children with special needs were identified. In Sweden, in service training and university based learning are perceived needs by teachers to enhance their teaching of children with special needs (Roll-Pettersson, 2001) This is related to Taiwan's facilities for special education which needed improvement as well, according to pre-school directors (Kang et.al, 2002). On the other hand, a family related challenge was the financial capacity of the family to afford assessment. Additionally, parents had negative attitudes about allowing their children to be assessed. They were apprehensive about the result of the diagnosis of their child.

The third domain was the parents' involvement. This was identified as a challenge that includes acceptance by parents that their child has a developmental condition. This is connected to the willingness of the parents to allow their children to undergo developmental assessment. Once the child was diagnosed, another challenge was initiating intervention and continuing coordination with the parents. Since special education requires more resources and time, parents without enough resources usually discontinue or reduce support for their child's intervention program. In China, parents' involvement was one of the desired outcomes as was increasing enrollment and developing inclusive programming (Deng & Manset, 2000).

Teachers' Recommendations

Two categories, which teachers identified as worthy of recommendation, were family and school related. Regarding family, there should be

strong collaboration with the parents, who are also encouraged to attend a seminar to deepen understanding of their children. However, without sustainable financial support from the parents, continuity of the program for the children will be at risk. On the other hand, there were several recommendations for schools to adopt. These were: having appropriate school facilities, acquisition of teaching materials, additional time allocation for child monitoring and supervision, and sensitivity training for teachers to reduce negative attitudes towards children with special needs (Almario, 1984, Tsang, 2004).

Discussion

This study conveys teachers' perspectives in delivering a special education program to children in a city in Central Philippines. Based on the results of the study, three major points were identified for discussion. Firstly, government operated SPED centers were available for every child; however, not all children could continually access them because of the cost and/or the attitude of their parents, teachers and students to children with special needs. For schools running special education programs, additional resources for facilities, instructions and professional related expenses were needed. SPED children required individual educational programs (IEP) to be prepared by their teachers. However, without proper developmental assessment, teachers could not develop them. This shows a service gap where schools should have proper developmental assessment tools and professionals (e.g. psychologists) to do this critical task. Efforts from teachers could possibly be wasted because an IEP might not fit the child's developmental needs (Koe, 2011). Additionally, parents were usually required to financially support their children's educational program, but this usually couldn't be sustained. If the attitudes of parents and teachers were negative towards the children's educational

program, this could lead to discontinuation and dropping out of children from the program. In Ontario, parents with average and high level incomes had better attitudes towards education for their child's special needs, thus resulting in a better educational outcome, compared with families on a lower income level (Dei & James, 2002). Secondly, almost all kinds of developmental conditions were catered for by government operated SPED centers; however, readiness of the schools in terms of facilities, teaching capabilities, instructional materials' availability, and community attitudes should be considered. In order for SPED centers to offer a quality SPED program, there should be enough facilities, training of teachers to handle specific development cases, and instructional materials to deliver special education. Additionally, the community should be prepared to work with the SPED center. Incorporating family involvement in the program is needed because family support is a high indicator of success for holistic development of children with special needs. They are important partners in the success of the program. Success of educational programs in countries like El Salvador and Mexico were greatly related to the coordination and participation of the parents in the communities (Jimenez & Sawada, 1999, & Geltler, et.al, 2006). Lastly, government operated SPED centers received support from Government; however, additional support was needed to augment the service gap for full development of children with special needs, including provision of assessment materials,

instruction tools and facilities. Funding should be properly allocated, based on the needs of the SPED Center (Yap & Indario, 2008).

Recommendations

This study gave insights by providers of special education programs for children with special needs. Results of this study were particularly intended to improve the service provision of special education. Program related recommendations included: the augmentation of the service gap between the IEP and the child's educational outcome. Assessment of the child's developmental condition should be available to determine what educational outcome was expected. Secondly, participation from the different stakeholders was necessary because it was noted as being one of the success factors in different educational programs in special education. Most importantly, parents should be considered as active partners in delivering special education, and their participation should be highly encouraged. Nevertheless, private sectors and non-government organizations should be consulted in planning for program development in order to mobilize resources, because investments in special education were globally limited and resource mobilization was highly encouraged. Additionally, methodological recommendation includes gaining insight from the parents and the school administrator as well. This will provide different perspectives through triangulation.

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