# CULTIVATING WELL-BEING THROUGH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Did you know that you can cultivate your well-being while developing the well-being of a person with special needs? It is said that "Lifelong personal **well-being** is achieved through responsible actions based on healthy attitudes and behaviors." What does this mean? How is this achieved? What are these healthy attitudes and behaviors?

I believe, that helping develop the well-being of those with special needs could help cultivate one's own personal well-being, and this should be the norm. We must not wait until something happens to us before we become aware, understand or think about what we can do to help.

There is truth to the saying you never really understand until it happens to you. You may normally have sympathy or sometimes pity for old folks struggling to walk or have sympathy for persons with special needs if they happen to be your relatives or very close friends. But when it really happens to you, that's when you really understand how real it is.

Today we talk about well-being, how we can cultivate it, and how it is related to inclusive education. How can inclusive education help promote well-being of learners with special education needs (LSEN)? What are the benefits for them? What are the benefits of the regular students and staff? In other words, how is well-being cultivated for all in this situation?

## Trying to make inclusion work

Inclusion as presented by the United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is not only constructing educational institutions and making them available for LSENs, but it is more about finding the walls that impede their access to quality education and reducing those walls in order for them to exercise their right to education. UNESCO also says inclusive education is the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes and social hindrances, of creating welcoming communities, and building an inclusive society (UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education, 2009). Inclusion is a system that caters to diverse learners and which supports diversity within the general education setting (UNESCO, 2008).

Through the years, caring for children with special needs has gone from segregation or isolation (home, churches, hospital, centers, special schools, special classes) to mainstreaming, to inclusion. In many countries around the world, there has been so much effort to include in the regular education schools, those children who are of different color, language, race, religion, socio-economic status, and different abilities or those with disabilities, also called persons with disabilities (PWDs), or children with special needs, (CSN), or learners with special education

needs (LSENs). These persons include those with physical differences (VI, HI, CP, chronic illness, orthopedic problems), neuro-developmental and sensory differences (like autism), cognitive and learning differences (LD, MR, GT), speech and communication problems, socio-emotional and behavior problems. As experts have become keener in identifying children with special needs, it seems like there are so many of them. So, do we build more special schools to accommodate them? Or do we include them in the regular schools? This is done with the goal of bringing equal access to education to all children and an opportunity to succeed and play an active part in the community.

The difference in the manner of inclusion happens in the context of the culture, the administration and amount of finances, or in other words, a country's economic and social realities. For the policy makers in each country, it is important that they understand and sympathize. Policies usually begin with a story. Policy makers should listen to the stories of the persons with special education needs, and the people who care for them. Why so? It is because there have been issues of bullying and discrimination, and problems like lack of facilities, lack of teacher training, and teacher frustration in trying to make inclusion work. People have been wondering if we should go for full or partial inclusion or put them in the least restrictive environment (Hill, A. 2009) where they can thrive.

It is difficult to make comparative studies on how inclusion is done in different countries. One problem might be the incomparability of terminology because the term "inclusion", which may have different meanings when translated to other languages perhaps due to historical, cultural, or political reasons. One cannot even come up with a statement that says "This is how Inclusive Education (IE) is done in Japan, in China, Malaysia, Indonesia, or in the Philippines, etc. For within one country itself, the way children are included varies immensely, from the public schools in city slums, to the high-end urban private schools with plenty of facilities, and to the far-flung simple but resourceful rural schools. The LSENs may not be assessed or provided for in the same way within the same country. This difference in policy and practice may be due to financial, procedural and administrative regulations or because at this point in time, the various schools within the country are going through different stages of transition from segregation to inclusion.

So, each country has its own way of solving problems, but one thing is universal, our desire to create the best conditions to help each child live a happy childhood and develop into a happy productive adult. We cannot generalize, but we can look into some best practices that have worked in other countries that might work for us in our context. It's worth a try.

It is quite difficult to show statistics on the prevalence of LSENs around the world due to available data coming from different years or different points in time, and difference in sources like having data only from the public school system or both public and private schools. But just to give a bird's eye view, here are some facts.

In the Philippines, about 16 for every 1,000 of the country's population had a disability. That is 1,443,000 persons out of 92,1 million household population or **1.57%** in the country (Census of population and Housing, 2010). The department of education has recorded 5.49 million Filipino children with special needs in public schools. Roughly **13%** of the total

population of school children in the public school system. Among these are 4.2 million PWDs (persons with disabilities) and 1.27 million gifted children.

In China, there are 80 million people with various disabilities living in China. This is **6%** of the total population of China (China Disabled Persons' Federation 2019) (from .15% in 2007)

In Malaysia, according to 2018 data, there are 2,458 students enrolled in special schools, and 62,226 learners with special needs (all ages) enrolled in its Integrated program.

In Japan, there are 202,307 pupils receiving special education out of 10.855.703 school children or **1.864%** of school children (all levels). (JSEAP, 2007).

In Indonesia, 2007 data shows 54,244 (.15%) are in special schools.

In the USA, around 6.2% of children aged 5 to 15 years old (2.8 million) have disabilities (Census Bureau, 2007), while 20% of those with ages 16 to 64 years have physical, mental or emotional problems.

So, we are speaking of providing inclusive education for LSENs of about 1.5% to 6% of school age children and youth in each country mentioned. Plus of course inclusion also for all those experiencing difficulties in learning and in establishing social connections and experiencing bullying and other issues because of having a different language, a different skin color, religion, race, or culture, etc. This seems to be a very small percentage within the population, but we are talking about thousands or even millions of children and youth. These children are not just a statistic, they are life. Either they grow up to be contributing to society or becoming a burden, is probably worth considering. So, we have to help them grow up to be more or less independent, productive and with good well-being.

There is an argument which says "everybody benefits from inclusion". Even children with mental retardation show increased social skills and academic proficiency. Advocates say that long-term effects of regular students included with special needs students at a very young age increased their sensitivity to challenges people face, increased their empathy and compassion, and improved their leadership skills. It is beneficial to the whole society. Research shows that inclusion helps students understand the importance of working together, of tolerance and empathy (Gillies, R.M.,2004) among regular education students and LSENs.

The move to have LSENs educated among general education children is protected by various laws. With the Salamanca Statement (1994), that reaffirms commitment to education for all, the UNESCO goal of Education for All (EFA), along with the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (RA 7277, 1992), the Millennium Development Goals (2000), the Sustainable Development Goals (2015), and the ever Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA,1975) which was for Education for All (EFA) and also says "children who receive special education services should learn in the least restrictive environment" (LRE) among others. This is done by having children spend as much time as possible with regular education children.

#### Some current practices in inclusion

In different countries, inclusive classes can be set up in a number of ways. Some schools use collaborative team teaching or co-teaching where there is a SPED teacher with the regular education teacher in the classroom for the whole day. In other schools, there are certain times of the day when the SPED teacher joins the regular class ("push in") instead of pulling out the LSENs. In both cases, the SPED teacher does not only help the LSEN, but other students as well. In other schools there are "shadow teachers" hired by parents, who attend only to the LSEN while the regular education teacher handles the whole class. In other schools, the "shadow teacher" is hired by the school and acts as assistant teacher, attending to all the children even during small group activities, while the teacher handles the lesson for the whole class.

In the Philippines, the use or implementation of the multi-factored assessment tool (MFAT) was launched last year (2018) starting with training the trainers, who will train general education teachers how to use the tool. Researches are now being done to check the effectiveness of this move. A policy was issued on the use of the MFAT to assess grade 1 (6 yrs. old) learners enrolled in general education schools. This informal assessment tool could possibly identify early the children who enter grade 1 with any developmental delays, advancements or manifestations of any learning disability. This is to be used by the general education teacher. The training also assists the teachers in planning and designing appropriate lessons with accommodations for the LSENs. This classroom activity-based informal assessment covers five domains of learning: (a) cognitive, (b) communication, (c) socioemotional, (d) psycho-motor, and (e) daily living skills. When there are students identified with certain difficulties, the teachers will provide some form of intervention. If the interventions do not work, then they will have to refer the child to specialists. This is in its initial stages of implementation with only 678 schools in 258 divisions. Hopefully, more LSENs will be served in schools near their residences so they do not have to travel far places just to get special services in few and far SPED centers that have facilities, teachers and learning materials. This hopefully can address the issue of teacher readiness, perception and attitude towards accepting students with special needs in their regular education classroom (Cruz, J. et al, 2018). Along with the MFAT, eight categories of disabilities were introduced by the Department of Education (DepEd), which was labeled "Difficulties". This is not dependent on whatever medical label of any disability given by a physician. Since there are disabilities that sometimes have the same difficulties. For example, some students with autism have problems in socialization, just like some students with attention deficit hyperactive disorder, or socio-emotional problem. So, the regular teacher identifies the need or the difficulty, regardless of the disability and addresses the need in his/her classroom. The classifications are as follows: Difficulty in Displaying Interpersonal Behavior, Difficulty in Adaptive Skills, Difficulty in Applying Knowledge, Difficulty in Hearing, Difficulty in Mobility, Difficulty in Remembering, Difficulty in Seeing and Difficulty in Communication. The DepEd also says, the SPED teachers will be called "case managers" and will be responsible for monitoring the LSENs placed in the regular classrooms.

With all these efforts, it is assumed that persons with special needs are receiving appropriate education in various settings, and even in regular schools. Regular education schools with inclusion are seen to be the most effective means of fighting against discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities and societies. This is believed to be an ideal way of

achieving education for all, and they provide an effective education to most children. However, this may not be the case. There may be many laws passed, and people may follow the latest trends in SPED, but the implementation of such laws is accompanied by many issues or problems. Issues like lack of funding, lack of facilities, large class sizes, severity of the disability, behavior problems and class disruptions, untrained regular teachers or administrators, lack of collaboration of regular education and special education teachers, negative attitudes or perceptions of teachers, parents, and students, including bullying.

However, factors that can determine the success of inclusive education in a school include: very good home-school or family-school partnerships, collaboration between general and special education teachers, well-constructed individualized education plans that specify accommodations, modifications and goals for each special student, an integrated service delivery and ongoing teacher and staff training.

Studies show that all students benefit from the strategies and resources available in an inclusive classroom. Differentiated instruction (DI) is key to inclusive education, where the class is divided into small groups and taught according to their specific learning needs. This is done by presenting lessons in various ways. Also, in using Universal Design for Learning (UDL), like using multisensory instruction with visual aids and manipulatives in teaching concepts. So the whole class benefits with this strategy. Sometimes, supportive teaching strategies are used like giving students opportunities to move around in the classroom or use fidgets. This is done with positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) in classroom management. Examples are the use of visual cues on class rules, multisensory whole brain teaching, or playing the good behavior game during classwork.

Another benefit of having inclusion is the <u>reduced stigma</u>. This makes all children aware that everyone is different and may learn their own way, at their own pace, and may present what they have learned in their own way. Growing up together gives the opportunity for these children to build and maintain friendships. Inclusive education also makes <u>effective use of resources</u>, since specialists in certain subjects or therapists and other service providers can help by be in g "pushed in" to the classroom to provide information and suggestions on how to help all students, instead of pulling out LSENs for therapy sessions. And there are <u>high expectations for all</u>. All students are expected to actively participate in class and achieve goals based on academic standards of the country. Even those with existing Individualized Education Plan (IEP) should have goals based on academic standards of the country. The use of DI, and UDL and co-teaching can make it easier to implement a standards-based IEP.

### Some Accommodations in Inclusion

Common accommodations include making the classroom an inclusive classroom. Making it accessible in terms of location and furniture for those with wheelchairs or other devices; providing advanced notice for assignments for those who need extra time to accomplish tasks; allowing alternative ways of completing assignments depending on learning styles, interests and abilities of the students; the use of assistive technology, like using a spell-check in a computer; allowing the use of assistive listening devices like a talking computer or calculator for those with visual impairments; as well as document conversion (like turning printed material

into Braille, large print, tape, embossed or raised letters, etc.); providing captions for film and video material for those with hearing impairment; allowing auxiliary aids and services for those with cerebral palsy and other disabilities that would require note takers, laboratory assistants, readers, or interpreters; course or program modifications; modifications in tests; extended time; taped lectures, or training on how to study and many more.

Curriculum accommodations in inclusive education must be functional, age-appropriate and must reflect transitions. A functional curriculum would allow students to participate in various settings in and out of the classroom. An age-appropriate curriculum (appropriate for the chronological age, not just the mental age) includes activities that are performed by their regular classmates to facilitate interaction.

Other accommodations include writing policies for inclusion (on instructional goals and learning conditions) and making parents, students and teachers aware of these. Clear policies would give less chances for conflicts (Wolak & Corbin, 1992). Another accommodation is inservice teacher training and participation in planning (Price, Mayfield, McFadden, and Marsh 2000).

## Well-being in the context of Inclusion

Well-being is the experience of being happy, healthy, socially connected, prosperous and purposeful. Note that it entails not only having good physical health and mental health, but also having high life satisfaction and a sense of meaning or purpose in life. Well-being is sought by everyone: young and old, male or female, no matter what skin color, race, religion, no matter what abilities or disabilities.

So how can people cultivate well-being? This may be simple, but not always easy. Sometimes you would need extra help. It is sometimes a matter of developing a choice and a habit to become and stay happy. There are some strategies to help you stick to your goals for well-being, like a happiness and well-being plan. People have to understand that well-being comes from one's thoughts, actions and experiences. And this can be affected by events or challenges (Dodge, R et al 2012).

There are different kinds of well-being like emotional, physical, social, work-place and societal well-being.

Emotional well-being is when you are resilient or can cope or bounce back and recover after experiencing a very painful event or situation like going through a problem, a disaster, a loss, or some injustice, disappointment or failure. It is also when you can practice some stress-management techniques or generate emotions or positive attitude, positive thinking, emotion regulation in the midst of challenges, and mindfulness that can lead to happiness or good feelings. We have to learn some happiness skills, some mindfulness skills, positive thinking skills and resilience skills. If we can also help persons with disabilities and those who are marginalized, to develop gratitude, kindness, humility, resilience and having a growth mindset, then we can hopefully help them cultivate emotional well-being. Like if you think positive, you

tend to have a better emotional well-being. We should realize that our thoughts, emotions and our body should be our instruments of function and should not be impediments in your life.

There's a saying that goes like this: "Happiness depends on your attitude, not on what you have". Look at the girl who treasures one flower, and the other girl who is miserable despite having so many flowers. Look at some people in a developing country still smiling in the middle of a disaster, and some people living in a highly developed country looking so miserable once a disaster hits. Our life of our generation has become very comfortable and convenient with all the advancement of science and technology. But this is the science and technology for the physical body. Many cultures think that if you provide well for the external environment, everything will turn out to be OK. But that's not how it works. Many people in rich countries could not stand the slightest inconvenience, let alone any natural disaster. We must realize that the content of our life may not change. But the context of our life can change, depending on us.

The son of a Japanese friend of mine did some hours of practicum among some poor mountain folks in the Philippines. He kept wondering why they seemed to be happy despite having so little in life. A person may be happy despite all the drama, disaster, disabilities, injustice, discrimination or other problems happening around, which we have no control of. It is up to you to choose to be peaceful or disturbed. Whether you are peaceful, happy, or miserable, that will not change what is happening in the world. The world will never happen 100% our way. We must remember that the source of human experience is within us. Happiness, misery, ecstasy, agony, pleasure or pain all comes from within us and is determined by us.

How can a person with disability still smile? When you are happy, you can enjoy life a little more, perform better and pursue your goals more effectively. Look again at our inclusion concept map. Where do you come into the concept map to help these persons with disabilities and other marginalized people, to help develop their social and emotional well-being?

Why should we bother to cultivate happiness and joy? Because this is the foundation of growth. Only when a person is in a pleasant state of experience, will one's body and brain function at its best. To be constantly happy, one must understand that all human experience comes from within you. One can be contented or miserable depending on one's attitude.

Remember, whatever actions you do to help will also help cultivate the well-being of persons with special needs, you also cultivate your own social and emotional well-being as well in return.

<u>Physical well-being</u> is when you improve the function of your body by eating healthy and doing enough exercise and enough sleep. Imagine how persons with disabilities and others who are marginalized can enhance their physical well-being if they are targets of bullying because of their physical state.

<u>Social well-being</u> is when you have the ability to communicate and to develop meaningful relationships with other people, no matter how they look, no matter the gender, no matter what socio-economic status they belong to, no matter if they have a disability. Notice that as we try to help persons with special needs or disabilities and others who are also marginalized,

by alleviating their situation against social discrimination or bullying, we are actually cultivating our own social well-being. When we develop social skills among persons with disabilities and others who are marginalized, and if we develop our own social skills, it is easier for us to have positive interactions with other people. This would make us feel less lonely, less angry and would make us feel less disconnected. We also feel we have more purpose in life, making our life more meaningful to live.

We can also try to maintain a support network that can help us overcome loneliness, like keep family ties strong, or having good friendships, spiritual advisers, psychiatrist if needed, etc. and of course staying away from abusive, toxic people at the same time. Do you know how many times persons with disabilities and others who are marginalized have to survive social discrimination on a daily basis? What can we do to change this?

Workplace well-being is when you have a job and you love your job. Hopefully, in this job of yours you have the ability and opportunity to pursue your interest, purpose and values, be happy, and professionally develop or enrich your skills. To have workplace well-being we have to maintain balance between work and life outside work, including family, leisure and rest. It would also help if we found purpose in the work that we do. Imagine the struggle of persons with disabilities and other marginalized people in trying to find a job or even maintaining it due to problems of bullying, low wages, and discrimination. What can be done?

<u>Societal well-being</u> is when you actively participate in a your community, in helping promote culture, and help in building a sustainable environment, even being part of volunteer groups that help other people, etc. We need to foster a culture of compassion, kindness, fairness or justice. This helps make us feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. In fact, if you think about it, why bother to even make time to discriminate other people like those with special needs, and other marginalized people? Why don't we focus on helping each other build the community, plant our food, recycle, create less waste, in order to live in a healthy world?

It is essential that all different types of well-being are taken cared for your overall well-being, because if one is not, everything else might be compromised. This is a life-long pursuit, but it is worth it.

Schools have a significant role in providing and ensuring social, emotional and physical well-being for students since children and youth spend plenty of time in school. Inclusive education gives opportunities for children with all kinds of abilities to learn, play and grow up together. This is an environment where individual differences are not a hindrance to making friends. Nor do they dictate school placement or with whom they go to school.

We must realize that inclusion is not merely using strategies to teach LSENs, nor dealing with placement of these students. Inclusion is more about belonging to a school community and a neighborhood. We must also take note that inclusion is not just about physically putting children in regular education schools. It is making them actually be active participants in that environment. This sense of belonging is done by teaching students about it. The instruction is intentional and well planned. Cultivating well-being can be promoted in schools.

The European network against bullying in learning and leisure environments (ENABLE) developed a program to tackle and reduce bullying by focusing building resilience by developing the social and emotional learning (SEL) with peer support strategies, thus developing social and emotional well-being of children and youth. The program has resources for teachers, teacher trainers, students and parents.

The Network of schools for health in Europe (SHE) focused on promotion of health among students and staff, including a balance of work and play. They implemented healthy school policies, school physical and social environment, individual health skills and services. There were also materials developed for awareness on eating, physical activity and prevention of childhood obesity.

The mindfulness in schools project trains students with attention problems. This project makes students feel calmer, happier and more fulfilled. Stress and anxiety management, and how to improve concentration and focus are also included, especially during exams. This involves self-awareness at the present, acknowledgement and acceptance of one's thoughts and feelings and physical sensations. This is done in the hopes of promoting resilience and emotional well-being.

## Cultivating lifelong personal well-being through inclusion

To achieve lifelong personal well-being, we need to develop responsible actions based on healthy attitudes and behaviors. The inclusive education environment could provide this opportunity. In inclusive education there are many social expectations, including psychological development and social consistency. When a person is excluded or bullied because of his/her disability, this would be a source of negative feelings and a decrease in self-esteem and psychological well-being. To help improve psychological well-being of LSENs in an inclusive setting, there has to be systematic social and psychological support in school and in the family.

Studies show how the struggle is real for students, teachers, parents, and administrators. But how will policy makers know? If you are a school administrator, superintendent, or a teacher with a student with special needs, don't wait until something happens to you before you become aware of it, before you understand or do something about it.

We need to realize that to have equality in <u>relationships</u> and <u>rights</u>, it is the <u>responsibility</u> of the school to have a solid social support system. These are the three new Rs of education. The rights of one have to be balanced by the rights of others. Everyone in school may desire to provide equality regarding love, rights, responsibilities and social solidarity. But the struggle to make inclusion happen is real. Teachers, who are in the forefront of inclusion, may agree with the ideals of inclusion, but they face stress and burn out, dealing with finding teaching strategies and classroom management methods that would work, behavior problems, lack of resources, and with so many expectations and challenges in teaching more and more diverse students without the needed back up and support.

Although there is a strong move for classrooms to be student centered, teachers have to be supported by principals, as well as parents and communities in terms of resources, funding

and training. Let us look at article 24 of the rights of persons with disabilities. It recognizes the rights of LSENs to education through inclusive education for the full development of human potential, development of their talents, etc., and to participate in society. But for policy makers to make effective policies and laws, they have to listen to the stories and understand the experiences of those in the inclusive setting: the teachers, parents, administrators, and the students themselves, if and when possible. They should consult and listen to these people. Is inclusive education good for the LSENs? Is inclusion good for us? Or should we still be open to other placements in the least restrictive environment possible? Don't wait for anything to happen to you before you understand and get involved.

Think about it this way. If you have escaped being born with a disability, escaped getting sick or having an accident that could cause a disability, you cannot escape growing old. Many times, as you get older, you become more prone to disabilities. When you become old and quite disabled to a certain degree, would you like to live in a world that keeps you away, sets you aside or completely ignores your existence due to your disability? Or would you like to live in a society that is inclusive? Now is the time to think about this.

We have different roles, as a child, you might end up to be a doctor or a president, a teacher or anything else... as an old person your role might be to guide others with wisdom learned through the years... as a person with a disability or with poor health, your role might be to inspire others with faith and hope... as a healthy normal person your role might be to help or to lead.

There are more important things to deal with other than discriminating against each other. We have to stop saying "Oh, I like this person, I don't like that person, this person is important to me, that person is not important to me...". Let us help each other, do things together... let us have the motivation and commitment to maintain healthy attitudes and behaviors in order to cultivate the well-being of those around us and of course our own well-being.

We talked about well-being in the context of inclusive education. Remember that we can cultivate our own different kinds of well-being by focusing on our physical and mental health, breathing, meditation, nutrition, exercise and sleep; identifying emotion sensations in our body; practicing active listening; seeing others as human beings; and offering kindness.

Being kind indiscriminately even to people who are different, with those who have disabilities, who are with different color, race, language, religion, or socioeconomic status, is actually good for cultivating our own well-being. Where are you in the web of inclusion? How can you help? Remember, if you help others, you are helping yourself. Give it a try. You never know what you can do unless you try.

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