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## Integrating Concepts and Expressions of Inclusion in the K – Curriculum: The Case of the Philippines

Princess Zarla J. Raguindin\*  
Shaanxi Normal University, CHINA

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**Abstract:** Inclusive education as a curricular trend is implemented by countries as an action taken in response to the collective call of the Salamanca Statement. It carries the tenet that all learners should be educated alongside their peers regardless of physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, and economic, language, cultural, and other perceived differences. School children, as peers of children with special needs, are co-implementers of the inclusive agenda. Young children are competent, possess their views and agencies, and have nascent characteristics that promote inclusion. As such, it is essential to explore how knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and ethics can further be developed and refined for the sake of creating an inclusive community through integrating them in the school curriculum. This paper sought to analyse the articulation of inclusive concepts and expressions in the K-curriculum and strategies utilized by the teachers to reinforce them. Two documents were analysed in this study to address the research questions: (a) prescribed k-curriculum currently used in the Philippines (b) interview transcripts of the key informants. Through content analysis, results of the study revealed that several inclusive concepts and expressions are articulated in the kindergarten curriculum across domains and are reinforced by teachers using varied strategies. Recommendations of the study are discussed.

**Keywords:** *Inclusive education, inclusive concepts and expressions, inclusion in the K-curriculum, content analysis.*

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### Introduction

The escalating heterogeneity in the schools' population today necessitates educational institutions to promote social cohesion. Thomas and Loxley (2007) posited that sustaining plurality and strengthening diversity remove barriers to exclusion by promoting uniqueness, acceptance, and eventually welcoming communities. As such, countries, through their educational institutions need to uphold inclusive education in their curricula, instructions, policies, and capacity building-mechanisms to promote inclusive school community for the sake of "education for all."

The active call for inclusivity is stipulated in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which adheres nations to adopt the framework of action in providing inclusion and equity through education of children with perceived differences. The advocacy of the statement vigorously defends that inclusion and participation are inherent human rights (UNESCO, 2009a). Therefore, it necessitates educational institutions to bolster the agenda by providing an inclusive platform for full human development open to all regardless of perceived differences. Inclusion necessitates affirming values and cultures - one of the dimensions of inclusion (Farrell, 2002; Howes, Davies & Fox, 2009; UNESCO, 2009b, 2016). Stakeholders, thus, should possess a principled definition of inclusion and work towards attaining it; therefore, there is a need to undergo re-assessment of conceptions and, more importantly, behavior (UNESCO, 2009b). Promoting inclusion requires a paradigm shift in the society's attitude, values, and understanding.

For many, the conception they hold about inclusion is mainly focused on those with a disability within the general education setting. Inclusive education is broad as it also calls for reform to eliminate social exclusion brought about by untoward responses to diversity (UNESCO, 2016). Increasingly, it calls educational institutions to integrate into their curriculum a repertoire of competencies by which an individual will be able to build knowledge, explore means of doing things, enhance one's self and, ultimately, develop the ability to live harmoniously (UNESCO, 2009a).

#### \* Correspondence:

Princess Zarla J. Raguindin, School of Education, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, China. ✉ [natin81@gmail.com](mailto:natin81@gmail.com), [natin\\_natin81@yahoo.com](mailto:natin_natin81@yahoo.com)



Booth, Ainscow, and Vaughan (2011) contend that inclusion will never be attainable as there will always be emerging exclusionary themes and pressures over time. Intentional integration of values and principles of inclusion in the curriculum, however, is compelling and consequential. It will subsequently create an inclusive community, promote humane relationships (Mezquita - Hoyos, Sanchez-Monroy, Morales-Martinez, Lopez-Ramirez, & Reyna-Gonzales, 2018), and combat developing discriminatory themes. As a result, a principled community that works toward the society it envisions to create – one that pursues belongingness, connectedness, and collective sense (Liasidou, 2015) -- will emerge.

Children with perceived differences in a highly diverse classroom are often the subject of ridicule, bullying, and a high rate of rejection (Kennedy, 2018; Valenzuela-Zambrano, Chacon-Lopez, Lopez-Justicia & Pano-Ramalho, 2016) inflicted by their peers. To date, few attempts have been made to investigate the impact of integrating values and cultures of inclusion in the systems' curricula and instructions - as a concrete action that can be done in response to this call. Studies about inclusive education focused mainly on children with perceived differences; little is known about how other stakeholders –especially class members - can promote inclusion.

“Children supporting children” in an inclusive classroom is an indicator of a high-quality inclusive education program (UNESCO, 2016), as it is potent in removing possible barriers and exclusion in school communities. As such, implementers of inclusive education need not only to execute programs that focus on children with special needs but also to give emphasis on promoting inclusive values in the school community through a partnership with the peers of children with special needs.

Research consistently claims that the preschool years are the stage when self-esteem, the vision of the world, and moral foundations are established. Also, during the early years, the mind's ability to absorb and learn is at its sharpest (Department of Education, 2015). Hence, it is imperative to integrate concepts of inclusion in the curriculum during this stage of development to mold the attitudes and behaviors of the children that will consequently lead to inclusive values and principles.

Decades after the implementation of the Salamanca Statement, the Philippines is has been struggling in its implementation of inclusive education. Themes that facilitate discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion still exist (Del-Corro - Tiangco & Bustos, 2014). One of the central claims of this study is that integrating values and cultures in the school curriculum is among the dominant means of achieving the broad goals of inclusion – promote diversity, sustain plurality, and provide an optimal learning experience for all regardless of perceived differences.

Through a content analysis, this paper investigated the concepts and expressions of inclusion articulated in the K curriculum prescribed by the Republic of the Philippines. Moreover, it has analyzed interview scripts from teachers on the strategies they employ to reinforce these concepts and expressions. The values and principles introduced in the kindergarten level are pre-requisite to later effective socially-competent behaviors, thereby facilitating effective integration and participation of diverse members of the society.

### *Diversity and inclusion*

Cultures and values of respect to plurality are at the core of inclusion. They should be promoted alongside targeting the learning objectives of learners with perceived differences. The practice of a culture that seeks to embrace differences and highlights diversity creates a community that is supportive of the holistic development of all learners (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017; Kennedy, 2018). Advancing inclusive values creates safe spaces for all children, consequently, supporting them to thrive and succeed - regardless of class, gender, age, race, sexuality, ethnicity, socio-economic status, abilities and characteristics, and other perceived difference. This culture is one of the overarching goals of inclusive education (UNESCO, 2016).

The “Diversity Wheel,” a theoretical framework proposed by Loden (1996), is the current lingua-franca of diversity. The model promotes respect, inclusion, cooperation, and responsibility. The work of Loden (1996) takes account of the strong association between grounds of exclusion and constructs like beliefs, class, gender, physical abilities, age, race and ethnicity, income. For Loden, the constructs are dimensions which an individual has no direct control but is mostly the reason for his/her exclusion.

The framework of this paper is in the same vein with the notion of the “Diversity Wheel.” Therefore, implicitly, the wheel proposes that the development of social competence is contributory to the facilitation of a community that upholds and affirms diversity. The framework is an active call for societies to open up diversity conversations to promote inclusion and mitigate exclusion – including school communities. Thus, developing and enhancing children's social competencies – like inclusive values and cultures - that support social cohesion is a powerful means of removing aspects that intensify exclusion (Loden, 1996). A school is a powerful institutions by which social needs are addressed and children are prepared to undertake their social roles (Kildan, Mehmet & Ahi, 2013).

Social competence is a “super skill” of every learner. There are a plethora of strategies that can be utilized in the classroom to target themes like friendship, acceptance, valuing differences, and respect for diversity, among others (Kennedy, 2018). This “super skill” does not only create an impact on the children with special needs but also creates

upward trajectory of inclusive behavior from everyone in the school community (Winter & O'Raw, 2010) - these social skills are powerful implementers of inclusion.

### *Social competence and expressions of inclusion among young children*

A socially competent individual exhibits the quality of acceptable interaction with their peers and can maintain good relations with others (Han & Kemple, 2006), instead becoming instrumental in creating, sustaining, and promoting an inclusive culture. Social competence is a capacity that is enhanced throughout life but is established from an early stage of life (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016; Han & Kemple, 2006; McCartney & Phillips, 2006). There is a need to ensure that an upward - leaning social competence is among the milestones during early childhood for a later success in life like academic and social areas (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016; Han & Kemple, 2006; Kemple, 2004; Luecken, Roubinov, & Tanaka, 2013; McCabe & Altamura, 2011; McCartney & Phillips, 2006; Moore et al., 2015; Yang, Datu, Lin, Lau & Li, 2019). Also, developing the social competence of an individual has been increasingly apparent among trends and issues in the discipline (Garner & Waajid, 2012; Vahedi, Farrokhi & Farajian, 2012). Thus being said, states should institutionalize educational policies that shall adhere to the development and refinement of school children's social competencies (Agboola & Tsai, 2012).

Theorists like Mead, Freud, Bowlby, Erikson, Sullivan, and Piaget provided one of the earliest discussions about the development and enhancement of social skills among young children (McCartney & Phillips, 2006). As the early childhood stage is believed to be a sensitive period for social-emotional learning (Han & Kemple, 2006; Kemple, 2004; McCabe & Altamura, 2011; McCartney & Phillips, 2006; Yang et al., 2019), it is strategic to provide rich classroom experiences to support the learners in the development of his/her social skills (Bierman & Erath, 2006; Han & Kemple, 2006; Kemple, 2004; McCartney & Phillips, 2006; Kennedy, 2018; Stagnitti, O'Connor & Sheppard, 2012).

Steadly, Schwartz, Levin and Luke (2008) provided a framework and described social skills as competencies that support an individual in creating and maintaining social relationships. This claim is in the same vein with the paper of Lynch and Simpson (2010) and Kennedy (2018), as they support the notion that there is an association between social skills and community where positive values and common spaces are recognized and merited. Skills like identifying social cues, collaborating, communicating, taking turns, respecting the rights of others, and being sensitive to one's needs and of the others are pro-social skills that individual should have to promote a sense of community- which emerge at an early stage of life (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016; Denham, Bassett & Zinsser, 2012; Han & Kemple, 2006; Jones, Zaslow, Darling-Churchill, & Halle, 2016; Lynch & Simpson, 2010; McCartney & Phillips, 2006; Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009; S. Kennedy, 2018; Yoder, 2014).

Moreover, interpersonal knowledge and skills (i.e., understanding other's needs, solving problems, cooperating and negotiating emotions, expressing emotion, reading social situation accurately, adjusting behavior to meet the demands of different social situation and in initiating and maintain friendship), cultural competence (i.e. acquiring knowledge of, respect for and the ability to interact effectively and comfortably with people of varying ethnic or racial backgrounds), and adopting social values (i.e. caring, equity, honesty, social justice, responsibility, a healthy lifestyle and flexibility) are among the standards of social competencies (Han & Kemple, 2006; Lynch & Simpson, 2010; McCartney & Phillips, 2006; S. Kennedy, 2018; Sendil & Erden, 2012; Yoder, 2014).

Young children should become skilled in expressing their actions and feelings with others and capable of controlling and adjusting their emotions and actions appropriately during social interactions (Kennedy, 2018). More importantly, young children should be encouraged to show positive behaviors toward their peers (McCartney & Phillips, 2006), which develops their social skills at the same time. Through these experiences and capacity-building mechanisms, they create a positive learning environment.

As inclusion is a social construct, implementing it necessitates the cooperation of all its stakeholders- even the learners. As such, children should be seen as co-creator of knowledge and identity, as they take part in promoting culture and communities where diversity is respected and valued (Odom, McConnell & Brown, 2019).

Social skills entail deliberate planning and implementation of pedagogies - such as integrating it in the prescribed curriculum. Consequently, facilitating collaboration among all learners to create an optimal learning environment that maximizes participation facilitates high learning standards for all (Kennedy, 2018; UNESCO, 2016).

### *The "Standards and Competencies for Five-Year-Old Filipino Children"*

One of the mandates of the 1986 Philippine Constitution enshrined in Article XIV, Section 3 (2), is for all educational institutions to promote moral education that fosters the love of humanity and respect for human rights (Philippine Constitution, 1986). Thus, integration, development, enhancement, and refinement of moral values and principles in the primary education curriculum are a response to the call of the law of the land.

The Philippines, through its Enhanced Basic Education Act (Department of Education, 2013), made kindergarten compulsory and mandatory to every Filipino learner before entering Grade one. The reform is in specifically in response to the universal kindergarten to prepare the child for school (David and Albert, 2015). The government-

prescribed curriculum for the kindergarten level published in July 2015 is technically known as “Standards and Competencies Five-Year-Old Filipino Children.” (Department of Education, 2015). For public schools, the contents and learning experiences they are expected to provide for the learners solely rest standards of the document. For private schools, they fuse their institutional requirements (e.g., practical living skills, bible content, and music) and the standards of the document in their curricula.

The Kindergarten Curriculum is in line with the goals of the K to 12 Philippine Basic Education Curriculum Framework and has adopted the National Early Learning Framework (Department of Education, 2015). The NELF enshrines the developmental benchmarks of Filipino children 0-6 years old and how the Early Childhood Care and Development Council (ECCD) implements a child development program in the country. The ECCD is the country’s government agency that monitors the implementation of child development centers.

The Kindergarten curriculum is firmly anchored on the theories and principles of *constructivism, integrative teaching, thematic curriculum, collaboration, inquiry-based approach, reflective teaching, play-based approach, and developmentally appropriate practices* (Department of Education, 2015).

Further, the prescribed curriculum adheres to the holistic development of every learner. Thus, the multi-domain development of each child is given high regard - socio-emotional development, values development, aesthetic/creative development, mathematics, understanding of the physical and natural environment, and language, literacy, and communication. The themes of the prescribed curriculum are “Myself,” “My family,” “My school,” “My community,” “The things around me.” Hence, content is horizontally articulated through the domains. In this way, the kindergarten learners also have a smooth transition to the content-based curriculum of Grades 1-12 (Department of Education, 2015).

For Filipinos, values that promote community is an integral part of their culture. Thus, their working definition of inclusive education is in recognizing and respecting one’s *kapwa* - the unity of the one-of-us-and-the-other - by Enriquez (1976) as cited in Bustos et al. (2014). This *kapwa* epitomizes the essence of inclusion. This *kapwa* - foremost, a standard of social-competency- is also expressed in the country’s prescribed curriculum.

If a state has to implement and achieve a durable and just inclusion, among the viable options is embedding respect and celebration of *kapwa* in the curriculum and instruction. The literature reviewed and discussed in this paper suggest a strong correlation of integrating inclusive values and expressions in the school’s curriculum and a society that bars exclusion and marginalization.

## Methods

### *Design*

This paper investigated and analyzed the concepts of inclusion embedded in the K-2 curriculum of the Republic of the Philippines. Further, it has also documented classroom strategies utilized by teachers to reinforce these concepts. This study will be instrumental in the meaningful understanding and practice of inclusion by upholding and affirming the importance of embedding inclusive concepts in the kindergarten curriculum to promote an upward trajectory of inclusive cultures and values.

This qualitative paper, through a content analysis of two documents, addressed the research purpose. Content analysis is conducted to analyze written, verbal, and visual documents, and make reliable inferences from existing records to provide additional knowledge, insights, and representation (Krippendorff, 1980, 2019).

Further, a standard open-ended interview and focus group discussion were also conducted to provide additional data to answer the research questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2002; Frankeal & Wallen & Hyun, 2012; Maxwell, 1996) which transcripts were also analysed. The texts were subjected to the first and second cycle coding to refine the data and establish an emerging theme (Saldana, 2015).

### *Materials and Participants*

This paper focused on two documents. It analyzed, first, the kindergarten curriculum utilized in the Philippines, and second, interview transcripts from the teacher-participants.

The first analysis focused on the document “Standard and Competencies for Five-Year-Old Filipino Children,” which was released by the Department of Education, the Republic of the Philippines, in July 2015. The curriculum is in congruence with the government-mandated Republic Act 10157, or “The Kindergarten Act,” which makes kindergarten compulsory and mandatory stage of primary education in the country (DepEd Memo No. 43, s. 2013). The document aimed at developing and refining the multi-domain development of every Filipino child so they will be ready for school. The material was analyzed according to the developmental domains to extract the concepts and expressions of inclusion embedded based on the constructs discussed in the literature.

The second document is focused on the narrative of 41 teacher-participants who were invited for a standard open-ended interview and focus group discussion. The purpose of the interview is to gather information and deepen the debate regarding the strategies utilized by schools to engage the students to develop concepts and expressions of inclusion. Key informants for the interview were purposively selected with the following criteria: (a) pre-school teacher, (b) taught in an early childhood education setting for a minimum of three years, and (c) is teaching in a class with a minimum class size of 15 pupils. The teacher-participants are from different agencies (public and private) and different career stages (novice, proficient, distinguished, highly distinguished teachers).

### *Procedure*

The necessary information was gathered through analysis of the kindergarten curriculum and interview transcripts from selected participants which took place between March – September 2018. The curriculum was studied carefully by the researcher and external coders. Constructs from the literature were considered and analyzed to identify the emerging themes from the documents being examined.

The researcher conducted an open-ended interview to gather data to answer the research questions. The interview used the local language as a medium of conversation. The interview was transcribed completely and in smooth verbatim. Smooth verbatim transcribes interview records word by word, but utterances like “uhm” or “ahs” and other decorating words are left out (Mayring, 2014).

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data extracted from the documents, several measures were done. For the first document, the researcher followed the recommendations of Krippendorff (2019) - additional two external coders were hired and conducted the coding independently to identify constructs from the documents. Further, the presence of external coders in a content analysis is also a form of triangulation of the data gathered (Burnard, 1991; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The coders were oriented about the framework of the constructs for a uniformed coding (Krippendorff, 2019). After this, the researcher met with the coders to finalize the themes which stemmed from the K-curriculum.

For the interview scripts, the documents were reviewed to rule out misinterpretations due to the tone of voice, emphasis, timing, and pauses (Maxwell, 1996). The transcriptions were sent to the participants for validation of the entries and member check (J.W. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). After this, first and second cycle coding was conducted to process the emerging themes (Saldana, 2015). The researcher and coders read both the documents and analysed data several times to rule out misconceptions and confirm results (Bengtsson, 2016).

### *Ethical Issues*

To approach this research in an ethical instance, a permit to conduct a study was submitted to the head of the institutions. Similarly, a letter describing the study was also sent and discussed to each teacher - participant to establish a clear relationship about the study. Codes were used to describe the participants for the utmost confidentiality and privacy.

### *Data Analysis*

The refinement of the qualitative data gathered through the analysis of the documents was an iterative process and was informed with the process recommended by Bengtsson (2016). The analytic process started with *decontextualisation*, followed by *reconstructualisation*, then *categorisation*, and finally, *compilation* (Bengtsson, 2016).

The initial stage is the *decontextualization* where the researchers internalized the curriculum guide and interview scripts to make sense of the documents under study. A deductive coding was applied since the researcher already created coding list literature review prior to analysis. The coding process to identify meaning units was performed repeatedly to increase the stability and reliability of the codes.

The second stage of the analytic process is the *reconstructualisation*. This process is done to ensure that all aspects of the documents were covered in relation to the research problem. The researchers used the conventional color coding – through coloring pens – to mark the text identified as meaning units and codes (Bengtsson, 2016; John W Creswell & Poth, 2017; Saldana, 2015). The re-reading and after checking of the original text was conducted to finalize meaning units and codes. A colour coding was con

The third stage of the analysis is *categorization*. Data were condensed from the original documents and the coded material is divided into themes and categories. The themes considered are according to the construct extracted from the literature. However, the categories are determined according to the research objective and the categorization commences when there is saturation of the constructs under study. The process of categorization is iterative to ensure that no construct falls into two categories.

The final stage of the analytic process is *compilation*. In this stage, the researchers conducted an extensive analysis of the document through an in-depth understanding of the results of the study. Also, it is at this stage when the writing

process was conducted. The researcher selected appropriate constructs and supporting quotations to finalize data that will answer the research questions. For final checking, the researcher administered an in-depth check of the document vis-à-vis literature reviewed.

### Findings

Through a content analysis, this qualitative paper investigated the inclusive concepts and expressions embedded in the k- curriculum prescribed by the Philippines and analysed interview scripts on the classroom strategies utilized by teachers to implement these concepts.

#### *Concepts and expressions of inclusion in the K-curriculum of the Republic of the Philippines*

A cursory glance at Table 1 reveals that a total of 16 constructs are directly related to the concepts and expressions of inclusion, which were articulated in the kindergarten curriculum of the Republic of the Philippines. The analytical constructs used are from (1) definition of inclusion (Ainscow, 2005; Booth et al., 2011; UNESCO, 2009a, 2016, 2017); (2) Social competence and skills (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016; Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016; Han & Kemple, 2006; Lynch & Simpson, 2010; McCartney & Phillips, 2006; S. Kennedy, 2018; Sendil & Erden, 2012; Yoder, 2014). It was also observed that there are repeated concepts and expressions across domains as the document reflects horizontal articulation of the competencies.

*Table 1. Cross-tabulation of frequencies of Concepts and Expressions of Inclusion Identified from the K curriculum of the Republic of the Philippines*

Concepts /Expressions of Peace	SDE	VD	PHMD	ACD	M	PNE	LLC	Frequency	Percentage
1. Self-expression	4	1	1	2	1		9	18	23.1%
2. Care	1					1		2	2.6%
3. Sharing		1						1	1.3%
4. Helpfulness		1				1		2	2.6%
5. Friendship	1							1	1.3%
6. Communication	2	1					12	15	19.23%
7. Sympathy	1							1	1.3%
8. Respect	3	2					1	6	7.7%
9. Participation/Cooperation		1	1	2		1	1	6	7.7%
10. Accurate recognition of social situation	3					1	2	6	7.7%
11. Appropriate response to social situations	2	2				1	1	6	7.7%
12. Equity		1						1	1.3%
13. Honesty		2						2	2.6%
14. Responsibility		6	2					8	10.3%
15. Flexibility	1					1		2	2.6%
16. Cultural awareness	1							1	1.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>100%</b>

Note: SDE – Socio-emotional Development; VD – Values Development; PHMD – Physical Health and Motor Development; ACD – Aesthetic and Creative Development; M – Mathematics; PNE – Physical and Natural Environment; LLC – Language, Literacy, and Communication. Department of Education. (2015). Standard and Competencies for Five-Year-Old Filipino Children.

Based on the table, self-expression garnered 23.1% and is the most articulated concept and expression of inclusion in the curriculum. This competency is articulated in all the domains except in the physical, health, and motor development, and natural environment domains, respectively. Self-expression in the socio-emotional domain targets the child's ability to communicate needs and experiences. While in the language, literacy, and communication domain, this skill targets competency, which supports sufficient and adequate self – an expression of the child's ideas and understanding. Also, self-expression in this paper encompasses different forms and media of expression.

Next, communication ranked second in terms of articulation of concepts and expressions of inclusion with a total percentage of 19.23%. This competency is articulated in the socio-emotional domain, values development domain, and significantly in the language, literacy, and communication area. The researchers and coders discussed and agreed that the competency mentioned earlier (self-expression) is more spontaneous and fluid in expression, hence, it was coded separately. Therefore, competencies which facilitate verbal language were tagged as communication to avoid overlapping codes.

Third, data revealed that responsibility as an inclusive concepts and expressions is 10.3% of the K-curriculum. The competency is articulated in the values development domain, and physical health and motor development domain. Skills that express responsibility in the curriculum are those that target willingness and ability to accomplish a task and the ability to abide by the rules.

Additionally, 7.7 % of the K-curriculum articulate the expressions “participation and cooperation.” This expression is articulated in all domains except in the mathematics domain. The competencies identified from the curriculum under this code are those that encourage the learner to involve in individual and group collaborations in various activities. On

the other hand, friendliness, care, sympathy, helpfulness, flexibility, equity, and the ability to appropriately code social situations and the ability to adequately respond to social situations and settings were identified as high in the socio-emotional domain and language, literacy and communication domain as concepts and expressions of inclusion. The competencies identified that described these expressions are being sensitive to the needs of others, turn-taking, expressing appropriate reactions in a varied social setting and listening attentively, respecting for differences using polite words, obeying, initiating help, and being able to form and maintain a friendship.

Cultural awareness (1.3%) is also reflected in the socio-emotional domain of the K-curriculum. This capacity develops the competencies of the child to be able to recognize differences according to language, culture, gender, characteristics, and other criteria.

As the country struggles in implementing inclusion (Muega, 2016), findings revealed that the country puts considerable effort to make it a normative part of the school curriculum. Children have agencies that allows them to co-construct a society that bars discrimination and marginalization. Therefore, intentionally integrating inclusive concepts and expressions of in the curriculum warrants a school community that respects and celebrates diversity.

#### *Strategies utilized by schools to reinforce the concepts and expressions of inclusion*

Based on the analysis of the interview transcripts, teacher – participants reported several strategies they use in the classroom to reinforce the development and refinement of social competence among kindergarteners including concepts and expressions of inclusion (as shown in Table 2). Further, results are discussed in relation to the model of classroom strategies of Kemple (2004) to reinforce social competence in the early childhood classroom (i.e., environmental arrangement, natural strategies, and planned routine activities).

*Table 2. Frequency Table of Teaching Strategies Employed by Teachers in Reinforcing Concepts and Expressions of Inclusion*

<b>Teaching Strategies</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Circle Time</b>	13.5%
<b>Use of learning centers</b>	13.5%
<b>Support in the expressing emotion</b>	7%
<b>Coaching and modelling</b>	7%
<b>Games</b>	13.5%
<b>Music and Movement</b>	13.5%
<b>Story-telling</b>	13.5%
<b>Film - viewing</b>	13.5%
<b>Culminating activities</b>	5%
<b>Total</b>	100%

Interview transcripts revealed the teacher-participants accounts that circle time is an avenue for the social interaction of their early graders. Circle time is the first structured activity in most early-grade classroom. The participants narrated that songs, greetings, weather check, member check, classroom rules reminders are among the opportunities for social interactions taking place during circle time. Other informants also mentioned asking class members how they are feeling in that particular day is a powerful means of teaching pupils about expressive and receptive language. Through short segments of singing, talking, listening, and moving during circle time, the teacher-participants narrated that children are able to share their feelings, take turn, agree on classroom rules, and listen to their peers.

The key informants also reported allocating time block for their class to explore learning centers allows a meaningful class social interaction. As each learning center (dramatic center, block center, math center, housekeeping center, grooming center, art center, reading center, science center, etc) has its own purpose, children have rich and varied experience for healthy social relationships. In this strategy, their pupils powerfully learn the virtue of sharing and taking turns through helping, role-playing, talking, listening, exploring a material together, and moving around facilitates a positive social environment in their classrooms.

Interview scripts revealed that the use of games to facilitate early graders socio-emotional learning. According to informants, integrating this teaching strategy allows collaboration, communication, exploration. Teacher-participants communicate rules, roles, and goals before the start of each game. To provide more opportunities to learn social-development, informants reported that grouping their learners into teams is informed by the class number, learners' profile, type of activity, and the frequency of each learner being together in one group. During games, the teachers reported that they are on guard for language use by the children to communicate with their peers, distribution of tasks, and situations where negative emotions arise. For those in Grade 1 and 2, teachers reported that games increase in difficulty and most of the time calls for their pupils to be more collaborative.

Additionally, teacher-participants reported music and movement to be among the strategies they utilize to reinforce concepts and expressions of inclusion. The informants mentioned how they observe their learners express their emotions through this strategy especially those teaching pre-schoolers. Most of the time, teachers choose songs where concepts like polite expressions, emotions, and good manners are embedded. As their pupils like to move, dance, and sing, this strategy allows the children their expressing their emotions. Moreover, the strategy is a help for children in transitioning from one activity to another. By doing so, children are prepared for each activity – including emotional preparedness.

The interview transcripts also revealed the teachers' use of story-telling and film viewing in reinforcing concepts and expressions of inclusion among their learners. The teacher- participants reported their use of stories in multi-media form is primarily use for values formation – part of these is inclusive expressions. This strategy is not a normative part of day activity and only take place according to the teachers' instructional plan. Additionally, teachers use multi-lingual (English, Filipino, local dialect if any) stories and short clips to convey embedded concepts that targets socio-emotional development.

Strategies to like supporting learners to express their emotions and, coaching and modelling are utilized by the key-informants to reinforce concepts and expressions of inclusion in their early grade classroom. According to the informants, segments in the class where children tend to tease classmates, argue and quarrel with their peers, physically hurt their playmates, and other aggressive behaviours are hard situations where learners need support in expressing emotions. Conversely, soft situations like asking for a favour, using polite expressions, taking turns, acknowledging a favour given are some situations where the teacher models inclusive expression and coaches the learners how to express them. Coaching and modelling is a strategy which necessitates the teacher to be on-guard and observant of incidents where soft and hard situations occur and intentionally model the strategy.

Finally, transcripts revealed that the key informants also use culminating activities to integrate concepts of inclusion. According to the participants, the activity is usually conducted after a theme or topic concludes, teachers set up an activity to wrap the topic and reinforce learning. While this is done in learning areas like math, social science, reading and writing, this strategy is an opportunity for the children, teachers, and parents to collaborate in an activity whether in a classroom or school-wide setting. The teachers reported that this may not be a usual part of every day schedule, but they observe their learners develop a more positive bond with their peers, teachers and parents after each activities.

The findings above suggest that it is imperative for classroom teachers to employ an extensive repertoire of teaching strategies to facilitate experiences that will promote the development and enhancement of social skills among children to the building of inclusive cultures. Findings revealed that majority of the time-block in an early childhood classroom such as circle time, use of learning centres, music and movement, story-telling, and film viewing are teaching strategies utilized by the teacher-participants for their learners' social learning and development. Next, teacher participants also revealed that providing support for children to express their emotions, and coaching and modelling, and conducting culminating activities also promotes healthy socio-emotional development of their learners.

### **Discussion**

Children in the early childhood stage who are provided with many opportunities to develop and enhance their expressive and receptive language, demonstrate social competence when they are with their peers (Mendez, Fantuzzon, & Cicchetti, 2002). The ability to adequately express one's self, ideas, and thoughts are all attributes of positively developed social competencies. In the context of early grades, where pretend play emerges and is at its peak, children effectively communicate their understanding and interpretations of phenomena around them (McCartney & Phillips, 2006).

Moreover, as the child is unable to express ones' self, frustrations arise. As a result, it limits interaction with peers, consequently, it increases aggression of varied forms. A child who is able to express self, positively interact with his/her peers (McCartney & Phillips, 2006). Therefore, children should learn to communicate extensively.

It is, therefore, essential to provide experiences and opportunities to young children with which they can express themselves through various media in a non-intimidating and non-discriminatory manner. In this way, useful and meaningful self-expression is encouraged, developed, and enhanced, thereby supporting the children in their social integration.

Another social skill integrated in the school curriculum is responsibility. Responsibility is the ability to take actions according to the standards of justice, rights, and the welfare of others, and to act by such a decision. Additionally, it is also the ability of the child to carry a task (Bear, Manning, & Izard, 2003). The development of responsible behavior benefits the child and his/her community (Bear et al., 2003). Hence, responsible conduct provides a positive relationship with other children, creates a favorable school climate and self-worth. Consequently, it creates a community that is free from any form and degree of exclusion.

Social skills that explicitly develop a friendship -- like care, sympathy, helpfulness, equity, and the ability to appropriately code social situations and the ability to respond to social situations and settings appropriately -- shows the child's intention to take into account the perspective of others. Although "other-regarding skill -- the capacity of the child to show support, help and develop a friendship with other children - takes time to be expanded and enhanced (Malti, Gummerum, Keller, Chaparro & Buchmann, 2012), it is essential to note that these are nascent competencies during early childhood.

Furthermore, the "other-regarding" skills are adaptive social values largely depends on the child's culture and context. The encompassing components of friendliness, care, sympathy, helpfulness, flexibility, and equity emerge and are expressed in varied forms and degrees. As expressions of "other-regarding" skills are unique and it influences the child to understand that each exists in a large group which necessitates consideration, participation, cooperation, and interaction -- which is beneficial to one's self and of others (Malti et al., 2012). Further, the "other-regarding" concept also stems from the value of care that predicts the ability of person to always consider what is good for others (Mortari & Ubbiali, 2017).

Cultural awareness was identified as the concept of inclusion articulated in the document studied. Han and Kemple (2006) defined these skills as the child's awareness of, respect for, and ability to interact positively with peers from a different culture. On a more sophisticated level, they also claimed that this helps the child to critically ask questions on the unfair treatment of other people in the global agenda, which compels them to live out fairness and justice.

On the whole, social competence characterizes effective and appropriate interaction and collaboration in the society. These competencies are pre-requisite to relationship building and maintenance. To deal effectively with the choices, opportunities, and challenges from the daily life, the development and refinement of social skills are deemed relevant (Han & Kemple, 2006). As such, it can be inferred that acquiring and exhibiting social competence facilitate a society where inclusion thrives. More importantly, it should be targeted among kindergarteners, as it is a crucial stage for the development and refinement of social competence. These competencies are pre-requisites to a later extensively active and positive interactions with peers.

For the second aim of the study, the transcripts show strong evidence that participants utilize environmental arrangement (Kemple, 2004) as a strategy in their classroom to develop and refine social competence among their kindergarteners. This strategy includes the physical structure and organization of the school, routines, and the emotional environment. Here, the teacher intentionally uses the learning areas (e.g., block area, art area, science area, drama and creative corner, playhouse among others) to facilitate turn-taking, sharing, collaboration, helpfulness, respect, social propriety and reciprocity, and meaningful interaction in the school community.

Furthermore, utilizing environmental arrangement as a strategy is crucial as children interact with each other away from adults. Here, children are not pressured to modify their language and actions to meet the expectations of adults. During play, children assume roles and skills, helping them become a lifelong player (Stagnitti et al., 2012). Thus, these are times where there are no inhibitions, and the teacher can intensively observe their actual behavior during peer interaction.

Second in the list, according to the model of Kemple (2004), is the naturalistic strategies. These strategies are naturally integrated into the whole process of learning and interaction. Hence, these are classroom strategies that necessitate the teacher's awareness, quick thinking, and thoughtful, intentional use of approach, but also requires a minimum amount of time and effort as it is a conflict mediation and on-the-spot support.

According to the study of Han and Kemple (2006), conflict mediation is the process where the teacher provides the much-needed scaffolding to help children develop and enhance their ability to resolve conflicts. For Ramsey (2008), on-the-spot support deals with spontaneous coaching and modeling, which takes place naturally. Additionally, Conroy and Brown (2002) believed this strategy is a form of "incidental teaching."

As such, coaching and modelling, and support to children to be able to express their emotions are a natural way of helping the children forge positive social behaviors. These strategies garnered 7%, although lower than other approaches, the teacher participants hold strong confidence in its impact in the classroom.

According to the transcripts analyzed, when frustrations, aggression, and self-centeredness are observed among their pupils, they approach the child and explain classroom rules, especially, the importance of displaying and expressing positive emotions. Also, they hold a belief that dealing with this behavior later promotes the ability to deal with frustrations and anger, thus, promoting positive social integration.

The third strategy in the model is planned routine activities. These are structured, pre-emptive, and pre-meditated strategies (Kemple, 2004). Planned routine activities are circle time, games, music and movement, story time, film viewing, and culminating activities, which ranked the highest among all strategies employed in the classroom to reinforce the concepts and expressions of inclusion.

Han and Kemple (2006) describe planned routine activities like group activities and peer-assisted strategies as planned by the teacher about the learning objectives to promote optimal success. These strategies are fun and meaningful,

especially creating a non-threatening atmosphere. As group task is carried to completion, children can develop active participation and contribution. Thus, they learn to work with groups in positive ways (UNESCO, 2016).

As reflected in the interview transcripts, teacher participants use different strategies to promote pro-social behaviors among children. They implement a judicious use of songs, stories, and movies that are values-oriented and are directly related to the development of social competence.

The practical implementation of the school curriculum significantly lies on the adeptness of the teacher through in-depth knowledge of content and, more importantly, pedagogy (Han & Kemple, 2006; Lynch & Simpson, 2010; S. Kennedy, 2018). Several micro-skills gained from social-emotional learning does not come from socialization alone (Yang et al., 2019); therefore, a plethora of pedagogy to develop and refine different knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and ethics for children to become a socially competent individual is needed. Kennedy (2018) strongly claims that the best facilitator of the development of an emerging social competence among the young is the teacher. For Denham, Bassett and Zinsler (2012), they believe that teachers are primarily the socializer of young children's emotional competence.

One of the roadmaps to a high-quality implementation of inclusive education should address the learning environment. Classrooms should promote social cohesion. If inclusion has to be given attention, it will compel the schools' community to create an avenue to celebrate diversity and plurality and at the same time, alleviate discrimination and exclusion (Bustos et al., 2014). Thus, inclusive culture and values start with the development and enhancement of inclusive concepts and expressions, especially among young children. As such, learners in the standardized curriculum are also levers in the promotion of a just and a high-quality inclusive education program through exhibiting competent social skills and behaviors.

### Conclusion

This study attempted to problematize the place of curriculum and classroom strategies as powerful tools in developing and refining knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and ethics among young children to become well-rounded individuals. Similarly, it also studied how inclusion should be carried out by stakeholders, specifically the peers of the children with special needs through the development and refinement of competencies directly related to concepts and expressions of inclusion.

Children have emerging capacities that allow them to attend, engage, and participate in varied aspects of their young lives. Consequently, they can be collaborators and co-constructors in building knowledge and promoting values and cultures. Thus, school curriculum should be a platform- by which their capital and contexts are utilized- so children can become active agents in promoting meaningful and productive social interactions (Odom et al., 2019). Baglieri and Shapiro (2017) further added that, as co-constructors of society, children should be guided and supported towards creating a positive social environment that promotes, upholds, and affirms inclusion. One powerful means of ensuring this is the consideration of curriculum content and the role it plays in the child's development of understanding on matters of identities, cultures, values, and their positions in the society.

#### *Moving forward*

Thus, in the light of investigating and analyzing the K curriculum of the Republic of the Philippines, the following insights were gained and recommendations are made:

- The place of the curriculum in any learning institution is crucial as it dictates the competencies which are to be developed among its end-user – the learners. As matters about curriculum content and implementation spill over to the learners, it is essential to ensure relevant and responsive content for it to become meaningful to the children.
- Early childhood is a crucial stage. Thus, emerging concepts and expressions of inclusion as pre-requisite to a later pro-social competency should be targeted.
- Part of the comprehensive implementation of inclusion is the learners. Being co-creators and co-constructors of a diverse community, they should be given opportunities to develop and refine adaptive skills that facilitate just, disciplined, caring, supportive, and celebratory community.
- It is essential for the teacher to have an in-depth knowledge of the social development of each learner, specifically the development and refinement of social skills, to be able to integrate them effectively in their instruction.
- Classroom teachers through studying, reflecting, and planning can effectively utilize plethora of teaching strategies to support the learners develop and refine their socio-emotional skills.
- Collaboration and other form of child-to-child interaction should be maximized in the teaching – learning process as it enhances communication, friendship, sympathy, respect, and other pro-social skills.

UNESCO (2009a) appeals to its member states to anchor their educational agenda on the four pillars of learning - learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together. These pillars are hallmarks of a high-

quality inclusive culture, values, and principles. These hallmarks can be achieved mainly by carrying out the premises of inclusion in the curriculum. It is a kind of curriculum that is powerful in respecting the sanctity and integrity of human rights - by nurturing cultures, values, and principles of tolerance, which transcends cultural, religious, gender, physical, emotional, social, economic, and other difference.

The data yielded in the study only focused on the K-curriculum and did not attempt to analyse how the concepts and expressions of inclusion are integrated into the totality of the basic education curriculum. Also, the paper suggests the conduct of classroom observations to determine whether all the concepts and expressions embedded in the prescribed curriculum are being fully implemented and achieved.

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