

## Exploring Inclusive Practices in Schools: A Systems Thinking Perspective

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Reyremark, is a Master Student in Educational Leadership and Management at the Gokongwei Brothers School of Education and Learning Design of the Ateneo de Manila University. He started his Master in Educational Administration, with the aim of focusing on curriculum for inclusive education. His undergraduate degree motivated him to an interest in pedagogy of educational leadership, and he was awarded a scholarship by ASEAN University Network Disability and Public Policy Network (AUN-DPPnet). Since then, he has taught at various inclusive institutions in the Philippines. He is the current Chairperson of the Ateneo Committee on Graduate Student Concerns representing the five schools of the Ateneo Higher Education. In his spare time, he practices yoga or runs the university grounds for some reflection and relaxation.



## Abstract

This reflective paper delves into the examination of inclusive practices in schools through the lens of systems thinking, a conceptual framework. Inclusive education aims to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. However, the intricate nature of educational systems often poses challenges to effective implementation. This paper advocates for the application of systems thinking as a valuable perspective to understand and improve the implementation of inclusive practices in schools. By conceptualizing schools as dynamic systems and considering the interconnectedness of various elements within them, educators and policymakers can gain deeper insights into the factors that influence inclusivity. The paper outlines the fundamental principles of systems thinking, demonstrates its application in the field of inclusive education, and highlights the potential benefits it offers for enhancing inclusive practices.

Keywords: inclusive practices, systems thinking, education, curriculum adaptation, systems thinking in inclusive education

## Introduction

In recent years, inclusive education has emerged as a pivotal force in providing equitable learning opportunities for students with diverse capabilities. The Commonwealth guide (Rieser, 2012) stresses the importance of inclusive education for equal opportunities and rights for individuals with disabilities. It highlights the need for policy frameworks, inclusive school cultures, and collaboration among stakeholders to create an inclusive education system globally, promoting social inclusion and well-being. This reflective account aims to chronicle my personal voyage within the realm of inclusive education, tracing my transition from a conventional educational system to my current role as a graduate student and educator in an inclusive school. Through this narrative, my intention is to highlight the transformative effects of inclusive education, both in shaping my own life and in the lives of the students I have had the privilege to teach.

## Early Education: Embarking on a Traditional Paradigm

Embarking on my educational journey, I found myself immersed in the confines of a traditional academic environment, where personalized accommodations tailored to my individual needs were regrettably absent. Galkienė and Monkevičienė (2021) underscore several key conditions vital for successful inclusive education: these include having a strong legal and policy framework based on human rights conventions, providing adequate resources and support services, fostering a positive school culture that values diversity and inclusion, and promoting collaboration among stakeholders. Nevertheless, fueled by an unwavering determination, I fearlessly charted my course through the formidable terrain of primary and secondary education, defying the odds and attaining academic triumphs amidst the scarcity of tailored support. Fueling my pursuit was an undeniable sense of competition, as if the conventional educational system and its unyielding standards harmonized seamlessly with my academic aspirations, driving me ever closer to the pursuit of knowledge and excellence.

## Undergraduate Education: A System Lacking Adaptations

Embarking on the uncharted realm of higher education, the journey of my undergraduate studies commenced with a fervent sense of expectation and an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Equipped with an unwavering determination and an indomitable spirit, I fearlessly propelled myself forward, relying solely on my steadfast belief in my abilities. Unfazed by the absence of any special accommodations, I skillfully navigated the intricate corridors of academia, meticulously carving my own path towards triumph.

Through tireless hours of devoted study, late-night cramming sessions, and an unwavering commitment to my coursework, I meticulously laid the groundwork for a profound academic foundation. With each completed assignment and conquered examination, my position among the intellectual elite was further solidified, enhancing my aptitude for critical thinking and expanding my intellectual breadth.

Amidst my personal achievements, I found myself contemplating the prevailing educational landscape that shaped my formative years. Inclusive education, although an invaluable concept, had not yet garnered the prominence and recognition it truly merited. The echoes of traditional conventions reverberated through the esteemed halls of learning, affording minimal space for alternative approaches and personalized assistance.

As my educational journey casts its reflection, it serves as a poignant reminder of the hurdles I encountered, not just as an aspiring scholar, but also as an advocate for inclusivity. It is at the nexus of personal experiences and the wider societal context that the true significance of this narrative emerges. It stands as a testament to the transformative power of education and a clarion call to champion the cause of inclusivity, ensuring that every student embarking on their own voyage of self-discovery and intellectual growth is not left behind.

## Graduate School: A Transformative Experience

I found myself utterly enthralled by the boundless possibilities that lay before me. It was during this pivotal phase of my scholarly pursuit that I was introduced to the

profound concept of inclusive education. This idea struck a chord deep within me and instigated a profound and transformative shift in my worldview.

In their unyielding commitment and unparalleled dedication, the university's graduate education embarked on a remarkable undertaking to explore the realm of accommodations and support services, even providing scholarships to persons with disabilities. These valiant efforts heralded a groundbreaking paradigm shift, transforming their approach to the cultivation of inclusive learning environments. Thus, the emergence of this extraordinary era signified the commencement of a momentous transformation in my educational journey.

### Teaching in an Inclusive Schools: An Eye-Opening Expedition

Immersed in the world of graduate studies, an irresistible pull beckoned me back to the realm of teaching, where the warm and inclusive atmosphere of school environments captivated me. Within this nurturing space, I had the privilege of first hand exposure to the resplendent power of inclusive education. Surrounded by a diverse range of students, each with their own unique abilities and backgrounds, I beheld the profound impact of an all-encompassing educational approach. It became abundantly clear that this framework of inclusivity possessed the extraordinary ability to enrich the lives of these students in truly transformative ways.

Inclusive schools transcend the confines of traditional classrooms, standing as beacons of hope and champions for the enhancement of all learners, regardless of disabilities or challenges. These institutions surpass the boundaries of conventional pedagogy, offering a comprehensive array of activities aimed at promoting social integration, personal growth, and the development of vital skills. It was within this inclusive school environment that the untapped potential of students was unlocked, as they wholeheartedly engaged in extracurricular pursuits, forged collaborative relationships with their peers, and nurtured an unwavering confidence in their abilities.

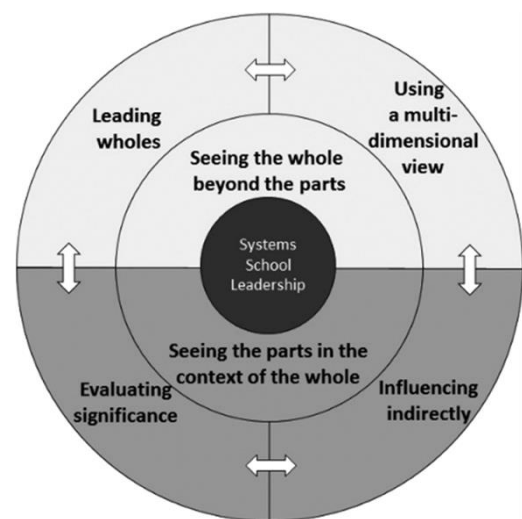
The experiences encountered during this transitional phase left me in awe each passing day. Students who had once been overlooked or underestimated rose above their circumstances, embracing their unique talents with unwavering determination.

These students not only flourished academically, but also developed a deep sense of self-acceptance and empowerment. The inclusive school environment acted as a catalytic force, igniting a spark within each student and guiding them towards a path of personal growth and fulfilment.

Through the studies and the return to teaching, the immense power of an inclusive educational approach has been witnessed. It is a power that transcends conventional barriers, enriches the lives of students with disabilities, and equips them with the necessary tools to thrive. As a fervent advocate for inclusive education, unwavering commitment remains intact in raising awareness and fostering an environment where every learner has the opportunity to shine and realize their full potential.

### Systems Thinking: A Foundation for Inclusive Education

The journey towards inclusive education is marked by the fundamental importance of curriculum adaptation, which seamlessly intertwines with the core principles of inclusive teaching. As a university student, I have personally witnessed the profound impact of making contextually relevant modifications to the curriculum in the Philippines, given its complex socio-cultural fabric. These adaptive strategies undeniably contribute to one's educational development. Notably, the incorporation of systems thinking as a comprehensive and integrative pedagogical framework in selected schools serves as a prime example of this adaptive philosophy.



*Framework by: Shaked, H., & Schechter, C. (2016)*

DeMatthews (2021) emphasizes inclusive leadership's importance, involving engagement with diverse stakeholders and promoting equity. This research adds to inclusive education literature, highlighting leadership and systems thinking in fostering inclusive school environments.

The framework of systems thinking is guiding us on the path towards inclusive education. It encourages individuals to surpass their individual components and instead perceive the interconnectedness of the entirety. By unraveling the intricate tapestry of how these components converge and interact within the broader educational landscape, systems thinking proves to be an influential tool within the realm of inclusive education. Schools are empowered to adroitly shape and embed its principles into their cultural ethos. The skillful integration of this framework into curricula and instructional methodologies by such schools ensures an educational experience that is not only holistically accommodating but also intellectually enriching in the truest sense.

### Key Components of Systems Thinking in Inclusive Education

**Recognizing the Wholeness Beyond Individual Parts:** Embracing inclusive education necessitates perceiving students as multidimensional beings, transcending the limitations imposed by their disabilities. Systems thinking empowers educators to delve into the unique blend of strengths and limitations that shape each student's learning journey.

**Placing Individual Parts within the Broader Context:** Providing effective accommodations requires teachers to consider how each student fits into the larger educational tapestry. This perspective allows for tailored support that harmoniously blends with the classroom environment, creating a unified symphony of learning.

**Fostering Connections between Multiple Dimensions:** Inclusive education thrives on the interconnectedness of students, educators, and support staff. Collaboration among these stakeholders, fostered by systems thinking, creates an environment where all students can surpass their boundaries. This holistic approach forms the foundation of a transformative educational experience.

**Promoting Harmony in a Multitude of Dimensions:** Students with disabilities aspire to various accomplishments and aspirations. Inclusive education, through the application of systems thinking, a comprehensive approach that encompasses diverse dimensions, enabling students to thrive both academically and personally.

According to Voulvoulis et al. (2022) systems thinking is a paradigm shift that recognizes the interconnectedness and complexity of social, economic, and environmental systems. By adopting a systems thinking perspective, decision-makers can identify root causes of sustainability challenges and design holistic solutions. Systems thinking enables a comprehensive understanding of interventions' implications and identifies potential unintended consequences.

By adopting inclusive education practices and harnessing the power of systems thinking, we can create a learning environment that fosters the growth and empowerment of every student, regardless of their unique abilities and challenges. Through my personal journey and experiences within inclusive education, I have witnessed firsthand the profound impact it can have, and I am committed to advocating for its continued advancement.



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