

FOSTERING EMPATHY-DRIVEN AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS THROUGH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The study of child disabilities has become an important topic these days. One of the common disabilities for children mentioned by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is cognitive disabilities. With the encouraging support from United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) Goal 10, this paper aims to review the support provided not only by the government but also by university students. Providing inclusive education programs is necessary to meet the needs of disabled kids. This study focuses on an inclusive program that becomes empathy-driven towards different groups of the community. By employing qualitative methods, which involve interviewing students that involved in community service activities, this paper aims to examine the impact of implementing inclusive education programs on students' lifelong learning. At the end of this study, it has been found that it is important to provide support for people with different disabilities as they are part of the community. These findings carry an important message to students at the tertiary level to be aware of the need for inclusive education programs for people who are in need.

Keywords: special needs; students, lifelong learning; inclusive program; empathy-driven

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, we have always heard about supporting and including people with disabilities. According to the WHO estimated that 1.3 billion people, about 16% of the global population, currently experience significant disability. By doing this, we can allow them to enjoy the same opportunities as those without these additional difficulties, including those with intellectual disabilities? An intellectual disability covers several conditions and manifests as an inability or reduced ability to learn, understand, and process new and complicated information. Often means that those with one are either unable to learn new skills or will need significantly more time and help to do so. For people with intellectual disabilities, life can be extremely difficult, and many say that they often feel like an outcast within their society or community. It can be seen among special children with cerebral palsy, autism, Down syndrome, ADHD and many more.

For a parent of a differently abled child, it can be tempting to keep them all to yourself. For them, no one knows best how to handle their children. Some prefer to keep their child at home to ensure they are safe and healthy. However, children need to have an active social life to build the skills that are so crucial to human interaction. Overprotection can unintentionally limit a child's opportunities for

socialization and learning from diverse experiences. Social interaction is crucial for the development of communication skills, emotional intelligence, and the ability to navigate various social settings. Through interactions with peers, children learn to empathize, collaborate, and develop a sense of belonging. In addition, Malaysia has adopted an inclusive education approach to enable everyone to include all individuals in education as well as in the community. This not only benefits differently abled children but also contributes to a more inclusive society. When children of all abilities learn together, it fosters understanding, reduces stigma, and promotes a culture of acceptance and diversity. Research suggests that inclusive education can lead to better academic and social outcomes for all students. Differently-abled children can thrive in inclusive environments, benefiting from tailored support while learning alongside their peers. Additionally, parental support networks play a crucial role in providing emotional support and practical advice. These networks help parents navigate the complexities of raising a differently abled child and promote a sense of solidarity and empowerment within the community.

Having children involved in community activities is a great way to show them a bigger slice of life while emphasizing neighborly interactions and appropriate behavior. Parents with special children aim to fulfill a life that helps them experience several places, hobbies, and activities, but this can be tricky when working with a child with special needs. Therefore, as a community, we need to provide support and show affection towards special needs children. Various efforts can be taken as a step in promoting inclusive education programs especially involve university students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Community engagement and lifelong learning

Community engagement involves relevant groups or individuals working together to enhance the community. It entails examining issues from various angles to identify optimal solutions, bringing people from diverse backgrounds together by establishing common objectives, fostering local networks and an environment conducive to ongoing discussions, and building trust between community organizations and local government bodies.

It can be seen nowadays that the initiatives on community engagement have now become a recognized role. In many countries, community engagement is essential to well-being initiatives and efforts to reduce health disparities, particularly in programs that aim to improve the health of underprivileged groups (Attree, 2011). While, from a systematic literature review, Koekkoek, Maarten Van Ham, and Reinout Kleinhans (2021) refer to community engagement as cooperation and reciprocal exchange of resources and information between institutions of higher education and their wider communities (local, regional/state, national, and international). It stated in the UM (Universiti Malaya) research book that community engagement involves university contributions in terms of developmental, entrepreneurial, technological innovation, and economic development. Different tools and strategies can be used to run engagement activities in ensuring their effectiveness and successfully address social needs. (Zalfa Laili Hamzah, UM, pg. 11)

In addition, Koekkoek, Maarten Van Ham, and Reinout Kleinhans (2021) discuss the diverse activities that can be considered forms of university-community engagement. These activities include lifelong learning, volunteerism among staff and students, service-based learning, participatory research, knowledge exchange, cultural and educational events, and providing access to university buildings for external use. It notes that while many of these activities existed before community

engagement became a focus, they are now recognized as important components of fostering university-community relationships.

Even though different activities may represent the concept of community engagement we can see that universities in Malaysia have included community engagement as part of their activities and projects. This has been discussed in a study by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hafiz Zakaria mentioned that community engagement is an emerging trend in Malaysian universities. There are universities such as USM (Universiti Sains Malaysia) and UKM (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) that have placed community engagement as their key values. (Hafiz Zakariya, 2014). Further discussed in Chuah Hong Ngee I, Jane Teng Yan Fang's research paper (2015) that co-curricular activities promote curricular learning; strengthen social adaptation; help to foster community engagement; and stimulate readiness for leadership. The results of the study imply that informal learning during co-curricular activities in the first year supports the upcoming learning of students in higher institutions.

Therefore, the engagement of university students in community activities has a profound impact on holistic learning, benefiting both the students and the community itself. As previously discussed, community engagement manifests in various forms, including activities that address societal issues such as inclusive education.

2.2 Empathy-Driven through community service activities

Empathy-driven community service initiatives are essential in cultivating social awareness, civic responsibility, and emotional intelligence in university students. According to recent research, students who take part in service-learning programs are better able to think critically and behave with compassion (Tran & Nguyen, 2023). Students can engage directly with marginalised communities through community engagement initiatives, for instance, which fosters a greater sense of social justice and empathy (Kaur & Hassan, 2024). In addition to helping the community, these programs help students develop personally, become more emotionally resilient, and be prepared to make valuable contributions to society once they graduate. Empathy is also becoming more widely acknowledged as a fundamental element of comprehensive student development, particularly when fostered via volunteer work. Through these practical learning opportunities, students can develop an emotional and cognitive connection to the reality encountered by marginalised communities. According to research, organised service-learning improves students' emotional intelligence, fosters social responsibility, and increases empathy (Tran & Nguyen, 2023). According to Kaur and Hassan (2024), Malaysian university students who took part in community service initiatives shown a significant increase in their capacity to consider other people's viewpoints and react compassionately. Additionally, these programs fostered a stronger sense of civic responsibility and international understanding. In a similar vein, a 2023 study on service-learning initiatives in Southeast Asia found that students acquired long-term empathy qualities that influenced more inclusive attitudes and socially conscious actions (Lim & Chan, 2023).

Building empathy via service is just as successful in STEM education. According to Leung et al. (2024), engineering and scientific students at a university in Hong Kong who participated in empathy-centered service-learning showed gains in endurance, teamwork, and emotional comprehension. Their involvement in resolving practical issues for underserved populations promoted their emotional and technical development. Additionally, Chia and Rahman (2024) emphasised how team-based learning enhanced students' comprehension of varied needs, particularly in interdisciplinary projects, by utilising tools like empathy maps. Furthermore, empathy training in the community has also been beneficial to medical education. According to a longitudinal study by Wald et al. (2023), medical

students who were exposed to patient-centered care and early community contact maintained higher levels of empathy throughout their clinical years, defying the conventional wisdom that empathy naturally decreases during professional training.

These results highlight how important it is to incorporate community service projects into academic programs in order to foster empathy in a long-lasting and profound way. In addition to improving the student's character and social abilities, these experiences also increase their potential to contribute to society in the future.

2.3 Inclusive education program

In order to provide equitable learning opportunities, build students' intercultural competences, and create a sense of belonging, inclusive programs are essential in higher education. According to recent studies, universities see an increase in academic engagement and social integration when they create programs that actively involve students from a variety of backgrounds, such as first-generation students, students with disabilities, and members of marginalised communities (Tan & Hashim, 2023). For instance, it has been demonstrated that inclusive peer mentorship programs boost under-represented student groups' enthusiasm, self-esteem, and retention rates (Omar & Ling, 2024). Additionally, systemic obstacles to participation are broken down via inclusive extracurricular activities that complement universal design principles, making the learning environment more accessible and encouraging for everyone (Rashid & Lee, 2023). These initiatives not only improve the academic performance of individual students but also foster a more equitable campus community.

Inclusive education refers to designing and implementing teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learners, including those from different socioeconomic backgrounds, cultures, and abilities (Zundan et al 2006). Studies have shown that exposure to diversity in educational settings can reduce stereotypes and biases (Wilkins, 2004). Inclusive pedagogies, such as collaborative projects, service learning, and problem-based learning, offer such as collaborative projects, service learning, and problem-based learning, offer students real-world interactions with diverse peers, fostering empathy and mutual respect (Dinmore, 2015).

Central to the inclusive education approach is the design and implementation of programs that foster meaningful interactions among diverse groups. Research suggests that contact with diverse peers, when structured thoughtfully, can significantly enhance empathy and reduce prejudice (May & Bridger, 2010). Inclusive education programs often incorporate various strategies to achieve these outcomes. Service-learning is one widely studied approach, where students engage in community projects involving marginalized groups such as individuals with disabilities, refugees, or underprivileged communities. Dunn et al. (2011) found that service-learning leads to measurable increases in empathy, cultural competence, and social responsibility among university students. These programs provide direct exposure to real-world challenges faced by diverse populations, prompting students to reflect on their own privileges and assumptions.

3. METHODS

This study focuses on a qualitative study. Students' responses were gathered in this study. School of General Studies, Asia Pacific University, in collaboration with a non-governmental organization, organized an inclusive education program that involved disabled kids. This event was attended by the parents and families of disabled kids and students from local and international nationalities. A total of four international students were interviewed during and after the event to get their feedback on the

topic discussed. Each session was handled with a semi-structured interview session and was audiotaped, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis.

4. FINDINGS

One of the research objectives of this study is to get feedback from students. Table 1.0 shows the findings received from the students through the interview session.

Table 1.0: Details on students' respondents

Participant	Country	Gender	Any experience in social work ?
Participant 1	Indonesia	Female	No experience
Participant 2	Maldives	Female	No experience
Participant 3	UAE	Male	No experience
Participant 4	Mozambique	Male	No experience

4.1 First-hand experience

The community engagement project brings exposure to those who participated in the event. In this experience, many students have given positive feedback since many of them were in their first year semester at university. The initiative to bring this event has changed students' perceptions on different groups of people in the community. Interestingly, when the interview session began, we never expected that we are going to have interviewees from different countries. However, the experience they got as a first-hand receiver has encouraged them to share their thought on community engagement activities.

I experienced a tremendous shift in my outlook. What I had expected to be a passive position turned out to be an experience full of genuine friendships and shared joy. Interactions with the youngsters demonstrated the impact of modest acts of kindness and support. Seeing their unvarnished joy and enthusiasm during the activities made me realize how important it is to create inclusive and fun experiences for everyone, regardless of their talents or problems. I met a child at the event, her name was Nurah, she was so calm, cute, and one of the smartest kids who played with me. I hope to see her again one day. This experience taught me important lessons about patience and the need to create environments in which everyone feels included and respected. It made me realize how much of an impact a little action, such as assisting a child in completing a game, can have on someone's enjoyment and sense of accomplishment, as the first kid had. I cannot imagine the struggle that the parents had.... (Participant 2)

I intend to apply what I've learnt from the event to my future actions. I strive to create inclusivity and joy in whatever I do, whether through volunteering or in my personal encounters. This event showed me that a small help or a smile can change a random person's day. (Participant 3)

Before the event, I had never exchanged experiences with disabled children. For me, helping them, watching them was amazing because after seeing how they deal with things etc, they also showed affection towards me and that made me so happy. (Participant 4)

At the beginning, before the event, I was not expecting much of it. I thought that I will just sit on a chair and let the kids play the game and just like that the day would go without having fun or interacting much with the kids. But then, when the event started and the kids arrived at the campus, I felt a bit of excitement to help them win, play, and have fun with them. The first kid who came to our

booth to play the games was running toward us laughing and excited to play the games. he came to me first to play the game ... I helped him to complete the game and finishing the last two rings. All the group members gave him a round of applause and he was so happy with it, and I gave him a sticker for winning. The happiness in his eyes when he finished the game was indescribable feeling. From just the first kid, all the expectations that I had before the event starts was different. (Participant 1)

From this feedback, the researcher valued that providing first-hand experience to the society will be valuable when the participants volunteer to join it. Through this experience too, it gives a bright exposure to the participants in understanding the needs of the people, especially when we are dealing with a certain group of people. Different difficulties have a different set of measurements to curb the issue. In this case, the students realize the struggle of communication and handling the kids through the event itself. Hence, by providing the opportunity of community engagement provide many messages directly and indirectly to the participants, especially students, in this study. Through the exposure, student indirectly learn how to be empathy towards different group of people in community. Regardless of their disability, they should be included in any program or activity.

Studying abroad too, brings challenges to many of international students. They are prone to acculturation stress which can happened due to cultural differences which needs social support to against the issue. In 2015, 5.1 million international students worldwide decided to study abroad (UNESCO, 2015). Among the challenges that international students have are discrimination and homesickness, other than difficulties in communication, developing relationships, changes in food, financial support and social support (Eustace, 2007; Nurul Farhanah & Nurazzura, 2016; Nurul Farhanah, Munirah, Fadhilah & Nor Izzati, 2017; Nurul Farhanah & Nurdyana, 2020). With all these challenges, this study also found that the acculturative stress can be solved if the students participate in university-community engagement activities. From the participants, all had admitted that they do have problem to adjust to the new culture of Malaysia. However, with the opportunity of understanding a specific group of people its open students' mind that everything in life needs sacrifices.

This is my first year, so adaptability is one of the effective skills that I have learned during community service... Besides that, I also learned how to communicate clearly to avoid misunderstandings and to overcome communication barriers between me and my members when I informed them about the details of the events. So, when I participated in this event, rather than I am stress with the food (laugh), I can at least appreciate what I have at the moment... but, looking at them (kids), I miss my parents... (Participant 2)

By engaging to the university-community engagement too, students have developed skills like using signage language and Google Translate to communicate with the parents and kids. Hence, rather than solely focuses on being afraid to communicate with the local people, international students managed to utilize available platforms to communicate with the parents and kids. This too, has helped the students to reduce their worry (especially in reducing the factors lead to acculturative stress; language barriers), by using the available sources.

Before the event, my first concern is how to communicate with them (parents and kids) if they only use Bahasa Melayu. So, on the day of the event, we had to find different means of interaction to help keep the children engaged and complete the games. Since some of them did not grasp the concept of gaining stickers when they completed a game, we could not resort to positive reinforcement to

encourage them. Rather, we tried to convey the idea that we were having a lot of fun playing the games by showing them. But at the same time, we had to make sure we were not creating an overwhelming environment and let them discover the games at their own pace. Planning activities to tend to the diverse needs of the children stimulates creative thinking. (Participant 3)

It is not only about language barriers... I was most concern on how to make them understand my instructions. What I can say is that, interacting with children requires more patience and time. It is important to speak slowly and clearly so they can learn. You need to show them rather than tell them what to do. So, of course I feel quite pressure to communicate with them (parents and kids) in the first place, but now I realize, we have many tools to communicate. So, language barriers is not my concern anymore (laugh). (Participant 4)

Hence, involving students in university-community engagement can help students to reduce their acculturative stress, especially in solving the issue of language barriers, and at the same time giving them opportunity to see different perspectives in solving the issue that they are having in adaptation period as they have just arrived to the hosting country.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Life-long learning throughout the inclusive education program

For students, engaging with an inclusive community such as parents who have down syndrome kids is a great treasure for them to understand the needs in sharing their knowledge and skills to the community in the future. Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation, is always known as a university which is good in high-technological background quality students, such as ASEAN CYBER SEA GAMES (2023), International Inter Varsity Innovation Challenge (2023), etc, but, the university also aimed at producing a well-rounded students who are empathy with the social needs of the people around the society. Hence, the implementation of university-community engagement activities is necessary to achieve this objective. Not only that, addressing acculturative stress becomes prevalent if there is no intervention taken by the university in helping the international students to adapt with a new society. With the opportunity of this event, students are now more open to engage with the society without worrying on the language barriers because there are many tools they can use to communicate with the local people indirectly, it does not teach the students to be a quick thinker in solving the issue since none of the participants do have any experience dealing with parents who have disable kids nor the kids itself. However, this study do have many limitations, including the number of participants are quite small and does not represent the whole community of students. Thus, in future research, it is important to get more respondents in getting more feedback on this issue. Given the limited funding and time constraints too, this research paper addresses community engagement. Many further studies can be made in understanding the children with disability, parental commitment and students' feedback in dealing with the kids. Hence, this study also recommends the next studies to focus on this discussion.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, service-learning is one of the approaches to allow students to engage in community projects involving marginalized groups such as individuals with disabilities, refugees, or underprivileged communities. Through these inclusive education programmes, direct exposure to real-world challenges in society prompts students to reflect on their privileges and assumptions. Through the student, it can be concluded that students develop an emotional and cognitive connection

to the reality encountered by marginalised communities. Thus it leads to lifelong learning, especially empathy-driven in through their involvement in community engagement and promotes inclusivity in society.

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