Building Bridges for Children and Youth with Special Needs: The Philippine Perspective

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1. Introduction

More than ten years have passed when the first organized set of laws for the welfare of persons with disabilities was promulgated in the Philippines. Republic Act 7277 or the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons was a response to the felt need of this sector to be better recognized as productive citizens of the country. Since then, children and youth with special needs (CYSN) have received considerable attention from both public and private sectors of the country. In the effort to substantiate the very essence of the Magna Carta, that is, the integration of the CYSN into the mainstream of society, its major stakeholders joined hands in pushing towards this end. In particular, many special education (SPED) school administrators have taken the initiative to involve their own community more seriously. They have very well noted that the success of their mission cannot be realized without the active participation of people, institutions, and establishments around them. After all, the school setting is just a transitory placement for CYSN. They are bound to live their fullest potential out in the big world.

The Ecological Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1986) provides a perspective with which to view the relationship of an individual with society (see figure on next page). The individual is actively in contact with his microsystem, that is, his family, peers, school, neighborhood, church, and health institutions. In turn the relationships among these different environmental settings within his microsystem make up the mesosystem. The theory also considers the exosystem – friends of family, social welfare services, legal services, mass media, etc. – with which the individual is not directly involved, but is influenced nonetheless through his microsystem. The theory stresses that change in any of the systems occurs in a mutual and co-evolutionary manner.

It is in the light of the above stated theory that selected private and government SPED schools in Metro Manila were profiled with respect to their programs and their system of collaboration with the different aspects of the society where they exist. This paper aims to present the dynamics of working with the social resources in the community, the factors which facilitate and impede collaboration, and the effects of such teamwork on the different societal systems.

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The Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (RA 7277) was amended in July 2006 as R.A. 9442. Henceforth, the law shall be called The Magna Carta for Persons with Disability.
2. School Linkages for Children and Youth with Special Needs (CYSN)

The school facilitates the relationships within the microsystem of CYSN. In acknowledgment of this, the Department of Education had registered around five hundred private schools with special education programs (2006), in addition to government-owned or public SPED schools. Such an increase considerably de-clogged the otherwise cramped classrooms of public SPED schools. Both public and private SPED schools provide a range of programs which cater to the specialized needs of CYSN.

The family is the major collaborator of the schools in the habilitation of the CYSN. To ensure that learning is effectively generalized in the home environment, parents are encouraged to attend parent education seminars which cover topics such as effective parenting, child abuse, and effective strategies in managing CYSN at home. These seminars are conducted by non-government organizations (or NGOs).

Health services are provided to government schools through the local units of the Department of Education. The students are given free medical and dental check-up, vaccinations, and referral to associated institutions, like the Philippine Mental Health Association when necessary. On the other hand, private schools have their own health clinics or refer their students to private hospitals.

The neighborhood is the primary resource when vocational training and possible job placement are being considered. Private SPED schools tap business establishments such as restaurants, laundromat, car wash, bakeshops, and offices in their community to successfully implement the transition programs of youth with special needs. Other private schools have developed their own sheltered workshops where the youth with special needs may be employed. Public schools, on the other hand, link up with a government agency which conducts vocational training (Technical Education and Skills Development Authority or TESDA).

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Santrock. (2004). *Life-Span Development*. 
Socialization with their peers for both public and private schools is made possible by linking up with various advocacy groups and partaking in their regular activities, such as the Special Olympics. Exposure trips in city parks, stadiums, museums, factories, and business establishments, such as department stores and specialty shops, are also done.

Church groups cannot but be involved in the holistic formation of CYSN. In a predominantly Christian country such as the Philippines, schools can access the parish churches in their communities to teach Christian doctrines to CYSN. Some schools are directly connected to Bible institutes that are ready to accept any student who wishes to deepen his faith.

This collaboration -- or mesosystem -- among the different components of the microsystem influences the exosystem. Many private SPED schools rely on friends of families of CYSN who own business establishments to support their program. School administrators say that it is much easier for them to work with these private establishments since the owners have had first-hand experience with CYSN. Social welfare services come to the aid of CYSN who do not have enough resources to pay for health-related services and assistive gadgets. The Department of Social Welfare and Development enables them to acquire the services they need and assistive devices like hearing aids for a much reduced cost. The attention of the media cannot but be drawn to business establishments who have adopted CYSN as their benefactors. The Special Olympics have always attracted media personalities. These kinds of media exposure definitely help in making the public more focused on what CYSN can do rather than on what they cannot accomplish. Legal services for CYSN are made more effective as the rest of society becomes more aware of the persons behind the disability. More than coordinating special activities, advocate groups have been zealous in fighting for the rights of CYSN.

3. Factors Affecting Collaboration

Some facilitative factors for collaboration have been pointed out by school administrators. The more popular schools were noted to link up better and faster with other members of society. This popularity may stem from the number of years the schools have existed, the time-tested unity of its staff, and the stability of its programs. They have already established a “link pool” which is professionally supervised by a “donor relations officer” who regulates the many cause-oriented groups and individuals who approach them to offer help.

What newly founded schools lack in years of experience, they compensate by being visible in their own community. The more visible they are, the more opportunities they have of gaining possible partners in society. Without disregarding the fact that some members of society may not yet know how to react to CYSN, some schools boldly but cautiously visit people and places around the community. Advocates of such daring steps admittedly reported mixed responses from the community. Many were eager to open their doors to this group due to novelty and popularity which they inevitably bring. Some were surprised to find more similarities than differences between CYSN and the regular learners and were motivated to understand more about this special population. But there were also those who opted to remain nonchalant.
One major impeding factor for effective collaboration is the ignorance of many about the conditions of CYSN in their own locale. In many areas of the archipelago, it is rather the adherence to myths about special children (such as “curse at birth” or “objects of malevolent spirits”) which causes this lack of awareness. Compounding factors such as poverty, misapprehensions in a multicultural community and even animosity further lead to unwarranted blocks in reaching out to CYSN.

‘Donor fatigue’ was also mentioned by school administrators as another impeding factor. When donor fatigue sets in, SPED schools which rely chiefly on donations experience even less help from benefactors.

4. Conclusion

It is only through the sustained efforts of CYSN, their families, SPED schools, and the rest of society that barriers to the integration of CYSN may be crossed. It cannot be the work of one sector alone. Each one has a role to play in building an environment which fosters the full development of CYSN in the mainstream of society.

<Questions and Answers after Country Report>

Q.1

The theory is very comprehensive and can be adapted in every country.
Could you give us the actual examples of the case studies that you are working on?
What is education program for autism?

A.1-1

Exposure programs, particular program for autism.
The children with autism are taken to community establishments such as shopping malls for exposure. This also lets other people get to know about autism and other special conditions as well.

A.1-2

The principal coordinates with other school and other public places. They plan the activities of children with autism to play and interact with other children.
The time and the place when and where the children will be brought to the community. Also, the readiness of the children with autism to interact with other children is also considered.