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Phenomenological study on the journey of integrated schools: from the views of stakeholders

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of PTA officials, teachers, and school administrators in integrated schools in Montevista, Davao de Oro, from 2017 to the present. Through in-depth interviews with nine respondents, key themes for overcoming challenges and fostering a supportive educational environment were identified: collaboration, determination, unity, and effective leadership. These elements are crucial in addressing the complexities of integrated school settings. The study recommends continuous professional development to enhance skills and knowledge, fostering an inclusive school culture, and ensuring adequate funding and resources from the Department of Education. Additionally, it suggests leveraging innovative solutions such as integrating technology into teaching, establishing mentorship programs for new teachers, and forming partnerships with external organizations for additional support. Promoting resilience and a culture of continuous improvement is also emphasized for navigating future challenges and ensuring sustained success. These findings underscore the importance of these key elements in enhancing stakeholder engagement and educational outcomes, offering valuable insights and a foundation for future research in similar contexts.

Keywords: Integrated School; Stakeholders; Phenomenological Study; Challenges; Coping Mechanisms

1. Introduction

Establishing or merging schools is a contentious issue in education policy. Nitta et al. (2010) highlight that merging schools in sparsely populated areas can enhance administrative efficiency and improve student experiences, while Karakaplan and Kutlu (2019) argue it can save resources by reducing costs. However, since the 20th century, such policies have often negatively impacted public school organizations, illustrating the complexity and potential unintended consequences of school mergers for communities and stakeholders. In Limpopo, South Africa, the Department of Basic Education plans to merge 308 schools with nearby larger ones to improve the teacher-pupil ratio and reduce administrative costs, as noted by Malkarnekar (2012) and Leach et al. (2010). While merging can lead to more specialized classes and facilities, there are concerns about larger districts being less responsive to local communities. The transition to integrated schools causes significant stress among internal stakeholders, impacting their ability to adapt to new academic schedules (Patel & Cummins, 2019).

In Northern Luzon, nine elementary schools in Ilocos Norte and Laoag City have been converted into integrated schools to allow graduates to continue their education locally, as studied by Lino and Lolinco (2018). This conversion reduces costs for parents and provides convenience for students by shortening travel distances. The transition aims to improve local educational efficiency, encourage dropouts to return, and ensure students receive quality education to become

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future leaders. Despite these benefits, the conversion presents challenges such as overcrowding, infrastructure issues, resource allocation, teacher shortages, and adjustment difficulties for students and teachers. The effort and collaboration of school administrators and stakeholders were crucial to this transition.

In Montevista District, three elementary schools—Alimadmad Integrated School, Canidkid Integrated School, and San Vicente Integrated School—were converted into Integrated Schools in the 2017-2018 school year. This transformation had a positive impact on the community by providing accessible education, particularly for students in isolated areas who would otherwise struggle to continue their schooling. Integrated Schools ensure that elementary graduates can pursue further education locally, alleviating the burden on parents who would face challenges sending their children to distant high schools. Despite the benefits, the conversion presents significant challenges for current school administrators and stakeholders, as they now manage both elementary and high school operations on a single campus, doubling or multiplying their responsibilities.

2. Material and Method

2.1. Qualitative – Phenomenological Method

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the perspectives of stakeholders from three elementary schools during the development of Integrated Schools. Qualitative research focuses on understanding participants' observations, experiences, thoughts, and feelings to uncover underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations, as described by Creswell (2012). This method is particularly adept at exploring ideas and beliefs that cannot be quantified. In phenomenological research, according to Creswell (2018), the focus is on describing the lived experiences of individuals to gain insights into their reality and perspectives on a phenomenon. Qualitative research commonly utilizes interviews—structured, semi-structured, or unstructured—as a primary method for data collection.

2.2. Individual In-Depth Interview

In this study, the participants were three school administrators, three teachers, and three PTA Presidents or officers from the participating schools: Alimadmad Integrated School, Canidkid Integrated School, and San Vicente Integrated School in Montevista District, Davao de Oro who have undergone face to face individual in-depth interview (IDI). These stakeholders play crucial roles in the existence and functioning of the three Integrated Schools in their community. Their involvement includes overseeing administrative operations, implementing pedagogical strategies, and engaging with the community to support the schools' development and sustainability. Their insights and experiences are vital to understanding the challenges and successes of maintaining integrated schools in the Montevista District.

3. Results and Discussion

The structured themes and the emerging patterns within them served as foundations for expanding the discussion of the study's findings. By connecting each theme to relevant literature and studies, a thorough discussion was conducted to determine their alignment with the theme.

What are the lived experiences of the stakeholders on the existence of the integrated school?

3.1. Experiences Being a Stakeholder in the Integrated School

The emerging themes are the community experiencing significant changes, providing positive impact, a problem with the school building, challenges, and being assigned as an adviser. These are the lived experiences of stakeholders in Integrated Schools. This indicates that stakeholders undergo varied experiences and changes in the existence of integrated schools.

According to Kemmis (2009), changes in the participants' actions, words, and interpersonal interactions are necessary for transformation. Moreover, the prevalence of predominantly negative themes suggests significant challenges within the conversion process. These factors underscore why becoming a stakeholder in the existence of integrated schools is inherently challenging.

Bernay (2020) emphasizes in his study that other features of successful partnerships could be accepting different areas of expertise and perspectives and including them in cooperation, establishing close interaction and close dialogue,

adapting to circumstances, managing conflicts effectively, blending theory and practice, and being proactive and open-minded.

3.2. Support or Resources Most Beneficial in Integrated School

These are the emerging themes that come from the responses provided by the participants: seeking help from higher officials, help coming from other stakeholders, and technical support. According to Fullan (2015) by sharpening the middle leadership's focus on system goals and local needs, schools, and districts can learn from one another and affect system change. These actions represent different forms of support that stakeholders in integrated schools rely on to address challenges and facilitate the conversion process. Whether it's seeking guidance and resources from higher officials, collaborating with other stakeholders for assistance and cooperation, or receiving technical support to navigate complex requirements, all these forms of support contribute to the success of integrated school initiatives by providing the necessary resources and expertise to overcome obstacles and achieve goals.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2015, establishing strong relationships with the community can enhance access to education, support student retention, uplift teacher morale, and improve attendance rates. This involvement includes both technical assistance and moral support from higher officials and stakeholders, highlighting the importance of collaborative efforts in promoting quality education.

3.3. Ways in Engaging Oneself in Integrated School

The emerging themes were through collaboration, actively engaging in activities, through surveying the community, through preparing the documents, being assigned as adviser, becoming an instructional leader and by taking risk. This theme highlights the importance of stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, parents, and community members, playing an active role in the school's functioning and development. It encompasses various strategies such as volunteering, attending meetings, joining committees, providing support, offering expertise, fostering collaboration, and promoting inclusivity. Overall, this theme emphasizes the significance of engagement and participation in creating a thriving and supportive integrated school environment.

According to Driscoll (2024), stakeholder engagement is an essential part of working together to get things done and there's no getting away from it. Good stakeholder relationships are based on full engagement not just communication. Achieving this can be tricky, but for the researcher it boils down to a healthy combination of good relationships and aligned goals.

In addition, as asserted in Jambo Blog (2023), effective stakeholder engagement is vital for the success of organizations and projects. Stakeholders shape decisions, offer valuable insights, and influence outcomes. However, engagement can sometimes lack depth and genuine value. It's essential to ensure that stakeholder engagement is meaningful and beneficial, as it directly impacts project success and organizational effectiveness. To enhance the adoption of meaningful external stakeholder engagement practices, internal stakeholders must go beyond mere claims of implementation and instead focus on its core objective: empowering individuals to have a say in decisions that impact them.

What are the challenges encountered by the stakeholders in the existence of integrated schools?

3.4. Challenges Encountered as Stakeholders in Integrated School

These are emerging themes that have developed by the participants: improving the school, sacrificing free time, complaints from parents, lack of learning materials, lack of classroom, lack of teachers, and lack of funds. These are the reasons why stakeholders encounter problems in integrated schools. The participants are considering these problems as crisis that need an attention to reinforce with.

One challenge that the study of De Torres (2021), has noted is that an impersonal school environment presents a challenge to stakeholder involvement in education. This impacts parental participation in supporting educational activities, thus affecting student achievement. Therefore, creating a conducive school environment that fosters collaboration between parents, stakeholders, and teachers is essential for student success in learning and the success of the institution.

The teaching and learning process involves both students and teachers' learning. Teachers gain insight into how the existence of integrated schools impacts students while also experiencing its effects on their teaching. Challenges arise

during this process, particularly after conversion, such as increased teacher workload and a doubled workload for administrators as well. These challenges affect both teachers and administrators.

3.5. The Most Challenging Aspect as a Stakeholder in Integrated School

The emerging themes described by the participants are encouraging parents to enroll their children, preparing documents, and defending the proposal. These challenges underscore the multifaceted nature of stakeholder involvement in integrated schools, encompassing aspects of advocacy, administrative tasks, and strategic planning. Successfully addressing these challenges requires collaboration, resourcefulness, and a deep commitment to the vision of an integrated school.

According to Sincar (2013) poverty, resource scarcity, and bureaucracy are the issues that administrators complain about most. Transformational leadership practices are essential to support stakeholders and the community in embracing the shift towards school-based management, fostering a shared vision, and providing ongoing motivation, and support for effective outcomes to overcome challenges.

3.6. Ways Challenges Affect as Stakeholders in Integrated Schools.

The emerging themes were providing positive effects, very helpful affecting people's perception, feeling proud, gaining strong connections with stakeholders, and becoming resilient. These challenges influence their effectiveness, morale, and educational outcomes for students.

According to De Torres (2021) found that an impersonal school environment hinders parental participation, negatively impacting student achievement. Therefore, a conducive school environment that fosters collaboration between parents and teachers is crucial for student success. However, according to Dookie (2013) noted that parents play a significant role in their children's academic achievement, but the quality of instruction also matters. The study revealed that poor parent-teacher relationships can harm student learning. Hence, effective teamwork between parents and teachers is essential to enhance teaching and learning activities.

How do stakeholders cope with the challenges in the existence of Integrated Schools?

3.7. Actions Done to Cope With the Challenges as Stakeholders in Integrated Schools

The emerging themes that emphasize the coping mechanisms of the participants are the following: strong determination, with the help of the school head, took it as a challenge, district supervisor and school head's support, be patient, be flexible, strong connection to the stakeholders, and making fair decisions. Stakeholders in integrated schools navigate challenges with determination, viewing them as opportunities for growth, supported by the school head and district supervisor, demonstrating patience, and flexibility, and fostering strong connections with stakeholders while ensuring fair decision-making processes.

To overcome those challenges, good communication is the key. According to Alkan and Ayik, in 2015, communication requires the establishment of a correct network and the correct transmission of messages along with leadership skills. Stakeholders are important in education because a team effort increases the chances of success in reaching educational goals. All stakeholders play important roles as part of a team working for the success of educational goals.

3.8. Solutions Employed on the Challenges Encountered as Stakeholder in Integrated Schools

These are the solutions served as the emerging themes done by the stakeholders: cooperation, determination, unity, accept the challenge, assistance from other expertise, leadership and conduct conference and meeting. Despite this major challenge, stakeholders became more resilient and buoyant in formulating solutions in integrated schools.

According to Trappett (2023), managing stakeholders is crucial throughout the process, enhancing the relationship between an organization and its stakeholders by harmonizing their common values while offering solutions during decision-making.

3.9. Assistance Sought to Help With the Challenges as Stakeholders in Integrated Schools

The emerging themes are help from public officials, advice and guidance from expertise, technical assistance, and financial support. Stakeholders leverage technical assistance to implement innovative solutions and best practices, ensuring the seamless integration of diverse educational programs and resources. Furthermore, they actively pursue

financial support, securing the necessary funding to sustain and enhance the integrated schooling environment, thereby empowering all students to thrive and succeed.

According to Hanover research in 2019, creating a resilient district and school community capable of stakeholders and community partners to actively participate in the task of school enhancement demands a clear emphasis on constructing support systems, nurturing accountability and responsibility, and establishing channels for the exchange of services, resources, and expertise.

What are the insights did the stakeholders gained from their experiences in the existence of Integrated school?

3.10. Insights on the Challenges Encountered as Stakeholders in an Integrated School

The following are the insights of stakeholders, discussed emerging themes, in the existence of integrated school: cooperation, a must, always think positive, always have patience, seek assistance, consult first the PSDS, provide teachers' need, and include teachers in the decision-making process. Insights into the challenges faced by stakeholders in integrated schools reveal the imperative nature of cooperation as a fundamental requirement, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a positive mindset and exercising patience throughout the process.

Building educational partnerships can be seen as an innovative approach to teaching because it frequently entails a shift in students' attitudes and behaviors. To develop and sustain educational innovations, there must be a shared school vision (Fullan et al., 2011).

3.11. Strategies Proven Effective as a Stakeholder in Integrated Schools

The emerging themes are establish good relationship with others, willingness, give full support, help without seeking in return, encourage parents to be involved, have unity, provide needed materials and create educational programs. In all challenges encountered, participants considered collaboration as the proven effective strategy useful as stakeholder in Integrated Schools.

Halonen et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of clearly defined roles and flexibility as essential elements for successful collaboration. Additionally, research suggests that collaboration can enhance the management of natural resources and environmental quality, resulting in more informed and sustainable decision-making. Collaborative efforts not only lead to wiser and more enduring decisions but also inspire action and drive meaningful change. This process involves leveraging complementary skills, adopting shared working approaches, and fostering mutual accountability among team members.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the journey of integrated schools involves many challenges, opportunities, and ways to improve. Despite facing problems like lack of resources, management issues, and community resistance, stakeholders show great resilience, determination, and commitment to making positive changes in their schools. Working together, strong leadership, and involving everyone are key to overcoming these challenges.

Effective teamwork among teachers, principals, parents, and students helps deal with the complexities of merging schools. Good leaders are important in guiding these efforts, ensuring everyone's voice is heard and decisions benefit the students. Keeping everyone involved and addressing concerns as they come up is also essential. With these efforts, integrated schools can not only face and overcome challenges but also grow as inclusive and lively learning communities. By embracing diversity, promoting fairness, and striving for excellence, these schools can provide enriching educational experiences that prepare students for success in today's interconnected world.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to disclosed.

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