

Understanding Dreams on Raised Dots: Narratives of a Visually Impaired Student in Special Education School

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ABSTRACT

This narrative study examined the stories of a visually impaired student in a Special Education School. Data were obtained through in-depth interview of a single participant using semi-structured interview. Three superordinate themes emerged from analysis: Social relation, Emotional Experiences and Personal Dispositions. Aspiration Model of Visually Impaired Student in SPED School was produced to elucidate the complex interactions of factors associated with the experiences of a visually impaired student in SPED School.

Keywords: narratives, special education, inclusive education, aspirations, mainstreaming

INTRODUCTION

Children with special needs possess the inherent right to dream, to make choices, and to determine their own futures. However, these aspirations are frequently overlooked or, when acknowledged, dismissed as unattainable. A prevailing belief is that realizing the dreams of children with special needs is virtually impossible. Consequently, their aspirations are often met with skepticism, misunderstanding, or even disparaging responses (Bridges, 2006). The expression of their dreams may not always conform to conventional forms of communication: the deaf cannot hear them, the mute cannot verbalize them, and the blind cannot perceive the colors of their dreams. Too often, society neglects to recognize that these children are integral members of our community (Lenka & Kent, 2016). In their silence, their voices resonate powerfully; in the absence of spoken words, their message is unequivocal; and in the darkness, the brilliance of their dreams remains undiminished.

During my internship at the Special Education Center, I had a casual yet thought-provoking conversation with the father of a visually impaired student who was mainstreamed into a regular classroom. In the course of our discussion, I asked for his perspective on the concept of "mainstreaming." He responded in his own words, "Ani man gud na sir, murag naa man gud naglaparo nga notebook daw pero wala nagtug-an ang bata kung kinsa..." (This is what happened: someone slapped my daughter with a notebook, but nobody would say who did it...). His words poignantly illustrated the complexities and challenges faced by children with special needs in mainstream educational settings. Although his answer seemed unrelated to the formal definition of mainstreaming, it revealed a deeper truth. His response made two things clear: first, that he didn't fully grasp the official concept of mainstreaming, but he understood the challenges his daughter faced in a regular school. Second, he associated the term negatively due to his daughter's experiences with bullying, reflecting the failure of mainstreaming to foster inclusion for her. This experience contrasts with the assumption that mainstreaming would aid special children in adjusting to school through tailored instruction and supportive systems (Tremblay, 2013).

Mainstreaming, as aligned with the United Nations' "Education for All" agenda, aims to provide quality basic education to all children regardless of condition (UNESCO, 2005). Ideally, mainstreaming seeks to

integrate children with special needs into regular education, fostering physical, social, and educational inclusion within the community so they can live fulfilling lives (Inciong, 2007; Tremblay, 2013). However, the father's story reflects a different reality: in the Philippines and other developing nations, high dropout rates among children with special needs persist, largely due to limited government funding, inadequate facilities, and lack of academic support (Arnaiz-Sánchez, De Haro-Rodríguez, Caballero, & Martínez-Abellán, 2023).

Hence, there is a gap in the literature exists regarding the impact of exclusion and bullying on the aspirations of visually impaired students within mainstream education settings. While much has been explored about the challenges faced by students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, there is limited research specifically examining how such experiences affect their personal aspirations. This study aims to address this gap by describing and understanding the aspirations of a visually impaired student enrolled in a mainstream education program at Mati Central Special Education School.

Objectives

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding using a narrative approach to explore the aspirations of a visually impaired student enrolled in a mainstream education program at Mati Central Special Education School, with a specific focus on how exclusion and bullying may influence their dreams and goals.

Specifically it aims to:

1. To gather and analyze the personal narrative of a visually impaired student regarding her aspirations within the context of a mainstream education program at Mati Central Special Education School.
2. To explore how the student's experiences of exclusion and bullying, as told through their narrative, have influenced their personal aspirations and self-perception.
3. To examine the coping strategies the student has developed, as shared in their story, for navigating the challenges of a mainstream educational setting and how these strategies impact their goals.
4. To create a model that reflects the aspirations of the participant.

Statement of the Problem

Based on the research objectives outlined above, the following research questions were developed:

1. What are the personal aspirations of a visually impaired student enrolled in a mainstream education program at Mati Central Special Education School, as expressed through their narrative?
2. How do the student's experiences of exclusion and bullying within the mainstream educational setting influence their personal aspirations and self-perception?
3. What coping strategies has the student developed to navigate the challenges of exclusion and bullying in the mainstream education environment, and how do these strategies impact their goals and aspirations?
4. How do factors relate interconnectedly to create a model of aspirations

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Concepts of Integration, Inclusion, and Mainstreaming

Terms like integration, inclusion, and mainstreaming are often used interchangeably but carry distinct meanings (Jahnukainen, 2014). Integration, as defined by Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021), is an approach where children with disabilities are provided access to education in regular schools within their communities, ensuring their right to grow alongside family. This process of integration seeks to bring children with special needs into the mainstream as naturally as possible, involving physical, social, and pedagogical aspects

(Tremblay, 2013). However, integration often relies on the assumption that these students can adapt to the academic and social demands of a regular school without significant changes to educational programs (Winter & O'Raw, 2010).

In contrast, inclusion promotes a transformation of educational policies and practices to meet the diverse needs of all learners, allowing them to thrive socially and academically. It involves redesigning the educational system to support every learner's needs, enabling special-needs students to build friendships and reduce isolation (Ainscow, 2020). Inclusion is aligned with the ideal of "education for all," where every learner is accepted, supported, and valued in the classroom (Tremblay, 2013).

Mainstreaming brings children with special needs into regular schools based on the belief that they will benefit socially and academically from this environment (Traya & Lopez, 2023). The aim is to foster awareness among non-disabled students while supporting adaptive behaviors in children with special needs (Freeman-Green, Williamson, & Cornelius; 2023). Despite the distinctions between integration, inclusion, and mainstreaming, they share a common goal: to help children with special needs gain essential skills and knowledge to live fulfilling lives.

Special Education and Children with Visual Impairment

Children with visual impairments cannot rely on visual cues for learning, which means they must be taught in systematic and sequential ways that engage their other senses if they are to succeed in mainstream education (Metatla, 2017). When this need goes unrecognized, it can negatively impact their academic performance (Lenka & Kant, 2016).

Research suggests that visually impaired children in regular schools can gain significant social, academic, and self-help skills. Manitsa and Doikou. (2022) found that visually impaired students benefit socially by participating in social interactions and fostering positive attitudes among peers. Academically, these students gain skills in mathematics, problem-solving, and reading. Self-help skills, such as grooming and toileting, are also developed through inclusive education programs. Similarly, George and Duquette (2006), found that with proper guidance, mainstream integration helps visually impaired students develop the social skills they need for the future.

However, George and Duquette (2008) also observed that mainstream integration may lead to feelings of isolation. Addressing this issue, Manitsa and Doikou (2022) recommended interventions to promote social acceptance among visually impaired students. These strategies include peer-mediated social-skills training, behavioral contracts, physical skills training, and assertiveness training. According to Tim (2007) seven factors contribute to successful inclusion: attitudes of teachers and peers, availability of trained educators, adaptive environments, appropriate resources, support services, community involvement, and a flexible curriculum.

For children with visual impairments to thrive in mainstream education, comprehensive support is essential. This support includes designing specialized educational approaches, fostering inclusive attitudes, providing necessary resources and skilled educators, and ensuring access to psychosocial services. These actions are essential for helping these children acquire social and survival skills that will benefit them in regular school settings.

Aspirations as Psychosocial Constructs

Hart (2012) defines aspirations as a combination of hopes, dreams, and goals, shaped by both conscious and unconscious motivations toward future achievements. Appadurai (2004) further describes aspirations as complex constructs, influenced not only by personal relationships but also by the desire for a better life (Bridges, 2006). Nussbaum (2005) emphasizes that aspirations are also shaped by factors such as fear, socioeconomic status, and societal expectations. Additionally, aspirations are often unspoken, remaining

abstract and evolving over time (Hart, 2012). While parents play a significant role in shaping their children's educational and career goals, socio-economic factors alone do not solely determine their aspirations (Palka, 2011).

In this study, the aspirations of a visually impaired student reveal the resilience, agency, and dreams often obscured by societal assumptions. The participants' story underscores the importance of enabling all children, regardless of ability, to define and pursue their own goals, supported by an inclusive, understanding, and adaptive education system.

Aspirations of Individuals with Special Needs

Miyauchi and Paul (2020) identified key factors that contribute to the success of individuals with visual impairments in school, emphasizing that a positive school climate, combined with supportive teachers who possess strong knowledge, skills, and high expectations, fosters an environment where students feel valued, motivated, and empowered to thrive both academically and personally. Consequently, adolescents with visual impairments tend to have similar aspirations regarding future education, careers, and social outcomes as their peers without visual impairments (Horvat-Gitsels, Cortina-Borja, & Rahi, 2024). In exploring these aspirations, Lenka and Kant (2016) found that while aspirations were generally lower, children in special schools had higher educational aspirations compared to those in mainstream settings, underscoring the important role of special schools in enhancing the aspirations of visually impaired children.

The studies cited above suggest that aspirations of visually impaired individuals were influenced by their environment. Thus, ensuring better adjustment requires providing psychological, emotional, and social support tailored to their needs.

Finally, while a significant body of research exists on special education for children with visual impairments, specific areas warrant further investigation. This study, though a requirement, aims to contribute valuable insights to the research community, particularly regarding the aspirations of visually impaired children.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research method utilizing narrative story to understand the stories of a visually impaired student who is currently enrolled in Mati Central Special Education School. Narrative study helped me elucidate the content and structure of her consciousness in describing the nature and meaning of her experiences in the context of her personal views and perspectives (Willig, 2013; Zeeck, 2012). A semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted which allowed the participant to narrate her experiences relative to mainstream education.

The key informant of this study is Betty, a 16 year old girl who is visually impaired. She attended a self-contained instruction for five (5) years in Mati Central SPED School, from pre-school to grade three, and was integrated in mainstream education as a fourth (4th) grader.

In getting her story, I conducted an in-depth semi-structured interview for her tell her own experiences on mainstream education. Her responses were recorded using audio recording device. The recorded interview was then transcribed and analyzed based on the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). I read and re-read the transcript to identify relevant themes.

Research Locale

This study was conducted in Rabat-Rocamora Mati Central - Special Education (RRMCES-SPED) School in Mati City, Davao Oriental, established in 2002. RRMCES-SPED as a special education schools caters both the special education and mainstream education

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations were taken into account when this study was conducted to ensure protection of the participant's rights, dignity, and well-being. These considerations include informed consent, confidentiality, respect for autonomy, sensitivity to vulnerable populations, beneficence and non-maleficence, cultural sensitivity, the right to withdraw, and responsible disclosure of findings.

Beneficence. I assured my participant that full protection will be observed while conducting the study, that is, ensuring that she will be free from stigma and discrimination while the study is being conducted.

Privacy and Confidentiality. I protected the identity of my participant by observing anonymity, that is, no identifiable information of the participant will be revealed throughout the study and all notes and information will be kept strictly private. The reason why I used pseudonym in presenting the findings was because I realized that my research locale is the only SPED school in our locality and my participant was not representative sample but the only case who met the criteria as research participants. It is likely that her anecdotes could be recognized by her peers, teachers and administrators.

Informed Consent. Before I started this study, I handed the participant's parents the informed consent form. Read along with them the provisions, explained thoroughly the content and the nature of the study and requested them to sign the written agreement voluntarily.

Informed Ascent. Since my key informants is a child with special education needs, I explained thoroughly the purpose of my study in a language she understood before I asked her verbal approval to be part of the study as participant.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From the narratives of the Betty, three superordinate themes emerged: Social Relations, Negative Emotions, and Personal Disposition. Social Relations captures the participant's complex social experiences, including both social dilemmas and support, influenced by mixed responses from peers and teachers.

Social Relations is characterized by experiences of bullying, social withdrawal, and isolation. It is also marked by moments of encouragement and support.

Bullying

Betty shared that her classmates teased her by wetting her papers, dig her belongings and took them away:

“Lain baya na akong mga classmate didto mambasa baya na og mga papel nako. tapos mabilin pa akong mga gamit, mangukay sila, pagpangukay nila ilang dalhon nila og layo. “ (My classmates wet my papers. Then they will leave my things behind, they will dig, and when they dig, they will take them far away.”)

Social Withdrawal and Isolation

Betty shared instances where she prefers to sit at the back and isolate herself.

“kay kung naa ko sa atubangan kay daghan kaayo manghilabot sa imong mga gamit.

Didto lang jud ko sa likod. Ang kalagutan nako sa ilaha kay sa likod lang ko.” (Because if I'm in front, my classmates will mess with my things. I really just stay at the back. That's how I responded, I just stay at the back.”)

Encouragement and support

Betty did not only experience negativity but also experienced encouragement and support from her teachers and classmates.

“Ana si teacher na buhata lang gud tong sa palaro nga imong gibuhat nimo... na daghan kaayo nagpadungog sa imo na istorya na nakapasakit sa imoha. Di ba nakaya to nimo? Kana pa kayang mga regular na makauban nimo nga makapasakit sa imuha dili nimo makaya?” "... One of my teachers said, ‘just do what you did during the game... that many people are gossiping about you, spreading stories that hurt you. Didn't you manage to handle that? If you were able to handle them, you can also handle those classmates in a regular class.

There were instances when Betty felt the support from her classmate.

“Didto nako gipasulat nko sa akong classmate akoang answer ana siya sa akoa tapos pagkakuan gipatan-aw niya kay Teacher Mah Len...comment ni Teacher Mah Len ok man .” (“I had my classmate write my answer for me there. Then she showed it to Teacher Mah Len... Teacher Mah Len commented, 'It's okay'”).

Aside from Social Relations, Betty also experiences moments of **Negative Emotions** which reflects her experiences of ambivalence, anxiety, worry, and helplessness. Ambivalence

Betty shared her feelings when she asked how she felt when knew she will be mainstreamed.

“Nagsagol ang kalipay og kanang kaguol basing maunsa ko didto kanang una jud akong naistorya kay teacher Mah Len, teacher kanang maglisod man ko didto teacher unya daghan man koy makasalamuha nga mga tao.” (“It’s a mixture of happiness and worry, thinking about what might happen to me there. The first one I talked to was Teacher Mah Len, I said, 'Teacher, I’m having a hard time there, and there are so many people I have to interact with.’”)

Anxiety and worry

The following responses qualifies Betty’s apprehensions:

“what if isa ka bulan nag-leave si Teacher Mah Len? Tapos sa isa ka bulan magtest gihapun mi mag-unsa na lang tong subject nako? (“What if Teacher Mah Len takes a leave for one month? And in that one month, we’ll still have a test, what will happen to my subject?”)

Mao gane kung mulakaw si Teacher Mah Len isa ka bulan. basing maunsa ko didto” (that’s why when Teacher Mah Len goes on leave for a month, I’m worried about what will happen to me there.”)

Personal Disposition showcases the Betty’s inner strength, reflected in her motivation, resilience, and empathy. Despite negative experiences, personal disposition highlights the participant's determination to pursue her aspirations.

Motivation

When asked what her plans are, Betty responded that she wanted be a teacher for visually impaired.

“Education lang akong gusto kanang sa VI (visually impaired)..kanang mahuman ko. Ganahan man gud ko magtudlo sa mga VI ganahan man gud ko magtudlo sa mga VI sir kanang wala gud nangiskwela , maluoy man gud ko sa ilaha.. kanang ako nang gikuan akong sarili ana sir ba kanang mga classmate. (“I just want to pursue (teacher) education, specifically for VI (visually impaired). I want to finish it. I really want to teach VI students because I feel sorry for them, especially those who haven’t been to school. I’ve already made that decision for myself, sir, about my classmates.”)

Resilience

Betty’s strength of character is reflected on how she responded to her negative experiences.

“Ay bully sir, ay kaya mana sir... ay non-sense mana sir mga bata mana sila sir. Kana na istorya tinuod dili ko paapekto "Bullying sir, that's nothing, sir... they're just kids, sir. I'm not really affected by it."

Empathy

Despite experiencing personal challenges, Betty expresses awareness and concern for the struggles of her classmates.

Pero ing ana mana sir noh? Basta pag abot sa pangarap diba minsan maguol ta ba? Kanang ako nang gikuan akong sarili ana sir ba kanang mga classmate. Pero kasabot pud ko na naglisod sila kay wala man pud sila, na wala siya naorient. ("But that's how it is, right, sir? When it comes to our dreams, sometimes we get sad, right? I've already made that decision for myself, sir, about my classmates. But I also understand them that they're struggling because they weren't oriented.")

The foregoing themes reflect factors that defines Betty's aspiration. Social Relation, Emotional Experience and Personal Disposition as emerging superordinate themes do not exist independently. Thus, assumptions on the psychosocial dynamics of aspirations based on the narratives of Betty, as the sole participant of this study, is reflected on the model as presented in Figure 1.

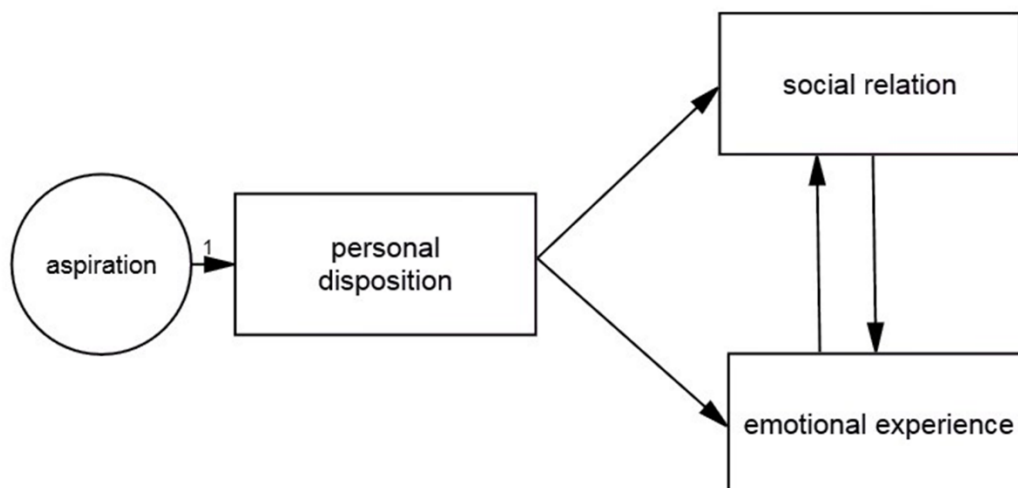


Fig 1. Aspiration Model of Visually Impaired Student in SPED School

The Aspiration Model of Visually Impaired Student is a product of a thorough analysis of the emerging themes and patterns based on the stories, and experiences of Betty. This model reflects her lived realities. By coding, categorizing and interpreting the data through inductive approach, a coherent model was constructed.

The Aspiration Model of Visually Impaired Student in SPED School presents how personal disposition, social relations and emotional experiences affect each other. Where personal disposition as a core trait plays a vital role in facing social relations and emotional experiences.

Furthermore, Betty's aspiration is deeply connected to her personal mindset, acting as a key motivator that helps her navigate the challenges within her current school environment. Her desire to assist others in similar circumstances has shaped her social interactions and given her a sense of purpose. This finding aligns with Lenka and Kant (2016), who found that children in special schools tend to have higher educational aspirations than those in mainstream settings, highlighting the significant role special schools play in fostering the aspirations of visually impaired children. This suggests that her aspiration was not influenced

by the encouragement of her supportive teacher (Miyauchi & Paul, 2020) and but was also further reinforced by her experiences in a specialized school (Lenka & Kant, 2016).

Betty's social experiences and relationship were shaped by a mix of social pressure and support. The challenges of bullying and perceived rejection starkly contrast with the ideals of social integration, the goal of special education (Traya & Lopez, 2023; Freeman-Green, et al. 2023). While physically integrated, Betty faced social struggles that might be considered a form of "baptism by fire," where she encountered rejection before acceptance. Over time, the frequency and intensity of these social conflicts led her to withdraw and isolate herself (George & Duquette, 2006), often sitting at the back of the class to avoid bullying. Conversely, the support from certain teachers and peers motivated her aspiration to become an educator, mirroring findings of Tim (2008) and Miyauchi and Paul (2020) that supportive attitudes in an inclusive environment significantly impact success.

Moreover, Betty's emotional experiences, particularly ambivalence, were shaped by her exposure to conflicting attitudes from peers and teachers. Her initial response to mainstreaming was mixed with happiness and sadness, reflecting her fears of social inadequacy and academic uncertainty (Ruin, Giese, & Haegele, 2021). However, her aspirations helped her cope with ambivalence as she channeled her goals toward helping other children with similar challenges. Additionally, her anxiety and worry, compounded by feelings of helplessness, were rooted in the social conflicts she faced (Dehghan, Kaboudi, Alizadeh, Heidarisharaf, & Cerniglia, 2020). Her hypothetical fears about losing supportive teachers heightened her anxiety, which eventually developed into helplessness after a specific incident in which she couldn't find a teacher when in need of support.

Betty's assertion, resilience and empathy emerged as critical personal strengths that enabled her to overcome negative experiences. Through assertiveness, she gained acceptance from some peers and challenged the skepticism of certain teachers, ultimately gaining their support. Her resilience countered unfounded assessments, showing her true potential, while her empathy allowed her to understand and forgive some teachers' indifferent behavior. This empathy strengthened her resolve to pursue her aspiration of becoming a teacher for the visually impaired.

Reflexivity

Reflecting on this study, I am reminded of the father's statement I quoted at the beginning of this paper—an expression that resonated with me deeply during our casual conversation. His words both amused and challenged me, prompting further reflection on Betty's situation. While Betty's placement in a mainstream class may have been partly due to her eloquence and her ability to articulate her ideas, it was not just her verbal skills that prompted me to reconsider her experiences. Rather, it was the dreams she shared voluntarily at the end of our conversation that truly inspired me to examine her responses and the larger context of her education.

The title, "Understanding Dreams on Raised Dots," functions as a metaphor for Betty's aspirations, expressed through braille—a form of writing that is invisible, lacking ink or visible text. For Betty, however, this dream holds deep significance, one that she feels a strong urge to communicate. It can only be fully comprehended through tactile engagement, much like the process of reading braille itself.

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