



Live Experiences of College Students in an Inclusive Environment: A Step Toward Student Empowerment and Belongingness

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Inclusive education promotes belonging, but day-to-day student experiences at Tubod College, particularly how institutional rules shape participation, remain underexplored. This qualitative descriptive study explores college students' lived experiences in inclusive environments to propose evidence-informed program components. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 purposefully selected students (2 from each of 5 departments: BECED, BS Criminology, BS Agriculture, BSSW, BS Entrepreneurship) at Tubod College. Thematic analysis identified facilitators such as teacher affirmation, which boosted participation, and peer support, which enhanced belonging, alongside tensions such as policy rigidity, which created exclusion, friction, and fear of judgment, hindering voice. Findings suggest targeted interventions, such as flexible policy audits and peer mentorship, to foster empowerment and belonging.

Materials and Methods: Qualitative descriptive research design is a method for providing an accurate, comprehensive, and transparent description of a phenomenon, event, or experience. A crucial element of this approach is providing an authentic representation of participants' perspectives and experiences in their natural setting. Researchers can avoid researcher bias and extensive theoretical framing while preserving an interpretation that is close to the data by using focus groups, interviews, observations, or document analysis. A semi-structured interview, which employs prepared open-ended questions and allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions and clarifications depending on the participant's responses, is the most adaptable way to collect data for this study. This method makes use of an interview guide that outlines key topics and questions, but the researcher is allowed to add, change, or remove questions depending on how the discussion is progressing.

Results: The lived experiences of college students in an inclusive learning environment were investigated in this study, with an emphasis on how they engage socially, contribute intellectually, control their emotions, overcome obstacles, and create coping mechanisms. Through qualitative interviews, ten students from a variety of programs—including BECED, BS Criminology, BS Agriculture, BSSW, and BS Entrepreneurship—shared their experiences. In general, a lot of students said that their inclusive setting was kind and encouraging. They emphasized how they felt inspired, involved, and appreciated by compassionate instructors and supportive peers. Their sense of school belonging was reinforced by cooperation and support. Students reported that their experiences in an inclusive environment were mostly positive. Students felt more at ease, motivated, and a part of the community thanks to friendly teachers, encouraging classmates, and accessible learning surroundings. Participants highlighted how inclusion enhanced their involvement, self-worth, and overall emotional well-being.

Conclusion: The study's conclusions show that college students' actual experiences in an inclusive classroom have a big influence on how they engage with others, participate in class, and feel emotionally. Supportive professors who provide guidance, show understanding, and encourage student voice

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significantly increase students' self-esteem and drive to actively engage in class activities. Students find it easier to express themselves and collaborate with others when they have positive peer interactions and cooperative learning opportunities. Despite these difficulties, students demonstrate resilience by asking for assistance from classmates and teachers, taking part in school events and organizations, and maintaining a positive attitude to help them cope with social and academic obligations. These patterns show that inclusion is not simply about school rules but also about everyday interactions, emotional safety, and the availability of supportive structures that allow students to thrive. This study finds that strengthening inclusive practices through mentorship programs, peer-support systems, accessible learning spaces, and collaborative activities is essential to empowering students, enhancing their academic and social engagement, and fostering holistic growth. In the end, this will guarantee that each student has a strong sense of success, confidence, and belonging in the academic community.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Lived Experiences, Student Empowerment, Belongingness, Phenomenological Research, Academic Participation, Coping Mechanisms

Introduction

Inclusive education has become a major issue in higher education. Colleges are expected to create learning environments where students from different academic, social, cultural, and personal backgrounds feel valued, supported, and equipped to succeed. In contemporary higher education, inclusion goes beyond simple physical access or policy statements; it involves the creation of meaningful academic and social settings that promote comprehensive student engagement and cultivate an authentic sense of belonging. Numerous studies consistently demonstrate that students' sense of belonging is closely associated with academic engagement, well-being, motivation, and persistence, making it an essential component of student success (Crawford et al., 2024; Dias-Broens et al., 2024; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Even though many colleges and universities publicly support inclusive values, students' experiences of inclusion are not always the same and depend on the situation. Recent research indicates that belonging in higher education is influenced by various interrelated factors, such as relationships with peers and faculty, institutional culture, classroom practices, and students' opportunities to feel valued, accepted, and secure within their educational environment (Dias-Broens et al., 2024; Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023). Simultaneously, inclusive practices in higher education face considerable challenges, particularly when institutional frameworks, pedagogical approaches, or cultural norms fail to appropriately accommodate student diversity in flexible and meaningful ways (Moriña, 2017; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). In this context, there is a need for localized research that examines how students authentically perceive inclusion in their daily academic experiences. Although Tubod College may advocate for inclusive practices at the institutional level, there is a dearth of empirical data regarding students' experiences of engagement, support, acceptance, and belonging within this specific academic setting. Some students might feel empowered to express their ideas and take part in academic and social activities, while others can feel unsure, left out, or confused about how to participate. Examining these lived experiences is essential for understanding the practical implementation of inclusion rather than its mere assumption in policy. This study seeks to synchronize institutional goals with authentic student experiences by emphasizing student views, thereby building an empirical basis for the development of a responsive Student Empowerment and Belongingness Program.

Objectives

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of college students in an inclusive environment and how these experiences can guide the development of a Student Empowerment and Belongingness Program that promotes active participation, engagement, and inclusivity among learners.





Literature review

Institutional Policies and Inclusive Practices

More and more, people see inclusive education in higher education as a whole approach that includes institutional regulations, inclusive pedagogical design, and social contexts that are helpful. Universities are obliged to set up systems that make it easier for students from different academic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds to be treated fairly, have access, and take part. Studies indicate that inclusive higher education institutions must extend beyond mere access, fostering institutional cultures that actively promote student engagement and a sense of belonging (Moriña, 2017; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a key foundation for making learning environments more inclusive. It emphasizes the creation of flexible teaching techniques, a variety of ways to test students, and learning resources that are easy for everyone to use, regardless of their learning style or needs. Research shows that when colleges and universities use inclusive teaching methods like UDL, students are more engaged in their studies, more confident, and emotionally healthier (Rao et al., 2014; Rose & Meyer, 2006). Such strategies facilitate institutions in diminishing obstacles to learning and fostering equal engagement in academic endeavors.

Even though more and more colleges and universities are adopting inclusive policies, research shows that policy frameworks alone are not enough to make sure that everyone is included. Numerous studies indicate that nuanced societal barriers, inadequate faculty training, and a lack of understanding of inclusive practices might impede the efficacy of institutional inclusion programs (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Moriña, 2017). So, schools need to do more than just have written policies. They also need to actively work to create inclusive classrooms, train teachers, and set up support mechanisms that encourage students to get involved and participate.

Peer mentoring programs, collaborative learning activities, and organized empowerment campaigns have also been recognized as significant strategies for enhancing inclusion and resilience among students with varied needs. These tactics help students build supportive networks of friends, boost their academic confidence, and improve their capacity to deal with social and academic problems (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Tinto, 2017). Furthermore, inclusive institutional practices that prioritize respect, diversity, and collaboration enhance individual student development while simultaneously fortifying institutional identity and fostering community cohesion.

Recent studies underscore the necessity of contextualizing inclusive approaches in relation to institutional environments. For example, small and regional institutions generally rely on intimate ties between students and teachers and learning settings that focus on the community to help students feel included. These kinds of organizations may do better with relational and participatory methods that put supporting interactions first instead of just following rules (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023). To keep higher education environments open to everyone, it's important to build institutional cultures based on empathy, teamwork, and respect for everyone.

Psychological Impact of Belongingness

A strong sense of belonging is widely recognized as a critical factor influencing students' academic motivation, psychological well-being, and overall success in higher education. Sense of belonging refers to students' perception that they are accepted, valued, and supported within their academic community. When students feel connected to their institution, peers, and instructors, they are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of engagement, persistence, and academic achievement (Crawford et al., 2024; Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Research further indicates that inclusive classroom practices and positive social interactions play a significant role in strengthening students' sense of belonging. Supportive relationships with peers and faculty members can foster emotional security, encourage participation, and create a collaborative learning atmosphere that enhances students' confidence and academic performance (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Tinto, 2017). In such environments, students are more willing to express their ideas, participate in discussions, and engage in collaborative learning activities.

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Conversely, experiences of social exclusion, discrimination, or rigid institutional structures may negatively affect students' psychological well-being and academic engagement. When students feel marginalized or disconnected from their learning community, their motivation and confidence may decline, potentially leading to reduced participation and lower academic persistence (Moriña, 2017; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). These findings highlight the importance of proactive institutional strategies that promote inclusive interactions, supportive learning environments, and equitable opportunities for participation. Overall, the literature suggests that fostering a strong sense of belonging is a fundamental component of inclusive higher education. Institutions that intentionally cultivate supportive academic communities, encourage collaborative relationships, and provide accessible support systems are more likely to enhance students' motivation, well-being, and long-term academic success.

Conceptual Framework

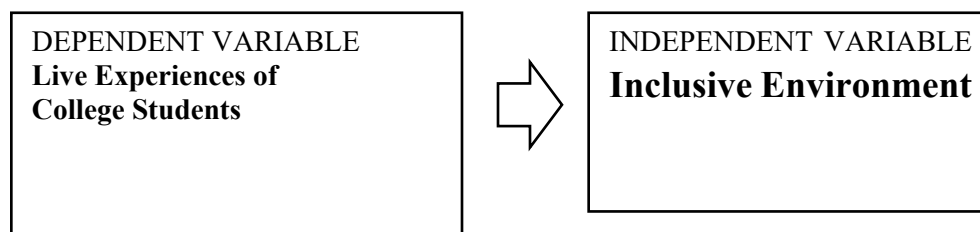


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore how inclusive education impacts student experiences across five academic departments: Agriculture, Criminology, Early Childhood Education, Social Work, and Entrepreneurship. Two purposively selected students from each department, totaling ten participants, shared their firsthand experiences through semi-structured interviews.

Data collection involved an open-ended interview guide, allowing flexibility to probe deeper into responses. Thematic analysis was used to transcribe, code, and identify patterns across the data, ensuring trustworthiness through member checking and peer validation. This approach emphasizes the "what" and "how" of students' lived experiences, providing rich, contextual insights to inform program development.

Results

Lived Experiences in Academic Participation, Social Interaction, and Emotional Well-being

The results show that most of the people who took part thought that the inclusive learning environment was encouraging and affirming, especially when it came to participating in class, interacting with peers, and their emotional well-being. Numerous students articulated feelings of being welcomed, encouraged, and driven to participate in learning activities when teachers exhibited openness and when peers offered social support. One participant said, "I feel welcome and motivated to learn every day" (P-1, English), and another said, "The teachers always encourage us to participate and share ideas" (P-2, English). In Bisaya, people said similar things, like "Maayo kaayo akong experience diri, ganahan ko sa klase ug sa mga kauban nako" (P-1, Bisaya) and "Ang suporta sa akong mga kauban ug sa mga titser nakapabati nako nga apil ko" (P-2, Bisaya). These narratives indicate that inclusive experiences frequently stem from quotidian relational practices, including teacher affirmation, peer acceptance, and possibilities for significant participation. This pattern aligns with prior higher education research indicating that students' sense of belonging is enhanced when they view themselves as acknowledged, esteemed, and socially integrated within their academic community (Dias-Broens et al., 2024; Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Kahu & Nelson, 2018).



Challenges in Maintaining Belonging and Inclusion

Although the overall tone of student experiences was positive, participants also reported barriers that complicated their sense of belonging and inclusion. These challenges included feelings of social exclusion, reluctance to express opinions, and difficulties arising from rigid institutional rules. One participant stated, "Usahay mabati nako nga wala ko apil sa grupo" (P-7), reflecting an experience of exclusion from peer interaction. Another participant shared, "Lisod usahay ipakita ang akong opinion kay mahadlok ko nga husgahan" (P-5), indicating fear of negative evaluation. Likewise, one student explained, "Usahay, ang mga rules sa school makapalisod sa akong pag-apil sa uban" (P-4), suggesting that school regulations may unintentionally limit participation. These findings imply that inclusion is not experienced uniformly and that formal institutional support does not automatically eliminate interpersonal and structural barriers. This interpretation aligns with the literature emphasizing that belonging in higher education can be undermined by exclusionary social dynamics, inflexible systems, and insufficiently responsive institutional practices (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Moraña, 2017; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021).

Coping Strategies Used by Students

The data also showed that students used a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with feelings of exclusion or emotional pain and to keep participating in campus life. A number of participants said that joining clubs, events, or activities at school helped them feel less alone and more connected. One participant said, "Apil ko sa mga clubs ug events sa school para dili ko mabati nga wala ko apil" (P-6). Some people relied on help from friends or teachers, as shown by the remark, "Mangayo ko ug tabang sa akong mga amigo o titser kung mabati ko nga na-left out ko" (P-10). These comments show that students don't just put up with hurdles; they actively look for places, people, and support systems that help them stay connected to the school. These findings align with previous research indicating that belonging is enhanced when students are provided with relational support, opportunities for participation, and inclusive pedagogical environments that validate their presence and agency (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021).

Influence on Empowerment, Motivation, and Relationships

Participants articulated how their inclusive or non-inclusive experiences influenced their confidence, motivation, and interpersonal interactions. Students' self-esteem and willingness to participate in both academic and social situations seemed to improve when they had positive relationships with teachers and classmates. This is shown by things like "Kon maayo ang experience, mas kumpiyansa ko" (P-9) and "Ang pag-apil ug suporta sa school nakadugang sa akong motivation" (P-3). Conversely, adverse experiences correlated with diminished confidence and reluctance to interact with others. These findings indicate that inclusive environments might enhance not just involvement but also students' sense of empowerment and emotional stability. This trend aligns with extensive data indicating that a sense of belonging in higher education is significantly linked to motivation, engagement, and well-being, whereas exclusion may undermine students' confidence and persistence (Crawford et al., 2024; Dias-Broens et al., 2024; Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Proposed Components for the Student Empowerment and Belongingness Program

Participants, drawing on their personal experiences, identified various practical interventions to enhance inclusion and a sense of belonging inside the college. Some of the suggested parts were counseling services, mentorship programs, team-building events, and workshops that everyone could attend. One participant said, "Gusto namo og mentorship ug support gikan sa peers," and another said, "Team-building ug school events makapaduol sa mga estudyante." These comments show that students appreciate both official and informal support systems that let them connect with others, get advice, and feel comfortable emotionally. The recommendations derived from the interviews align with research indicating that inclusive higher education necessitates more than mere access; it also requires intentional frameworks that facilitate peer connectivity, engagement, and acknowledgment among diverse student populations (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Moraña, 2017; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021).





Discussion

The results of this study underscore the crucial influence of inclusive environments on students' academic engagement, social interactions, and mental health. Participants consistently articulated experiences of being welcomed, supported, and encouraged by both educators and peers, fostering enhanced motivation and a profound sense of belonging within the academic community. These findings corroborate the expanding corpus of research indicating that a supportive and inclusive educational environment is essential for improving student engagement, confidence, and perseverance in higher education (Crawford et al., 2024; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Students are more likely to take part in classroom activities and make friends with their peers and teachers when they feel that their voices are heard and that they are respected members of the academic community.

The results also show that not all pupils feel included in the same way. Some participants said they had problems with social isolation, being afraid to speak their minds, and institutional regulations that can unintentionally keep people from participating. These examples demonstrate that formal pledges to inclusive education do not inherently ensure inclusive daily practices. Previous research indicates that students' sense of belonging may be compromised by subtle exclusion, fear of negative assessment, and inflexible institutional frameworks that do not address various student requirements (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Moriña, 2017). These results indicate that institutions need to go beyond simply making policy statements and actively promote relational and pedagogical practices that create a safe, respectful, and participatory learning environment.

Another significant conclusion of this study pertains to the coping methods utilized by students when faced with problems in inclusive settings. Numerous participants indicated involvement in extracurricular activities, affiliation with student organizations, or soliciting assistance from peers and educators as methods to sustain their connection with the academic community. These acts demonstrate kids' resilience and autonomy in addressing social and academic problems. This finding corroborates prior studies highlighting that peer support networks and significant social involvement might enhance students' ability to navigate problems and sustain their motivation in higher education (Dias-Broens et al., 2024; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). However, even if individual coping techniques show that they can change, they also show that there is a need for institutional structures that consistently foster inclusion and belonging.

The results thus underscore the significance of formulating structured activities that deliberately foster student empowerment and a sense of belonging. Participants' suggestions, such as mentorship programs, inclusive workshops, team-building activities, and counseling services, underscore the forms of institutional support that students consider significant. The literature has shown similar tactics as effective means for enhancing inclusive campus cultures and increasing student involvement (Moriña, 2017; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). A Student Empowerment and Belongingness Program that combines mentorship, peer cooperation, and adaptable institutional practices could assist in filling in the gaps and make the learning environment more responsive.

The report emphasizes that inclusive education in higher education encompasses not just institutional policies but also daily encounters, emotional safety, and accessible support services. Students are more likely to feel empowered, like they belong, and do well in school when schools actively create spaces that embrace diversity, encourage involvement, and offer genuine relational support. These findings enhance the comprehension of how inclusive approaches can bolster both student development and institutional efficacy.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of college students underscore the importance of inclusive learning environments in fostering engagement, emotional well-being, and social relationships. While positive experiences boost confidence and motivation, challenges persist that require institutional intervention. Developing a comprehensive Student Empowerment and Belongingness Program—focused on mentorship,





peer support, inclusive activities, and policy improvements—is essential for creating a more responsive and nurturing academic community.

Recommendation

Administrators: They may review and revise policies that unintentionally hinder participation, such as attendance or grading policies for diverse learners.

Faculty: They may continue creating inclusive classroom practices, providing constructive feedback, and adopting varied teaching strategies.

Students: They may engage actively in school programs, seek support when needed, and foster positive peer relationships.

Future Researchers: They may conduct longitudinal studies to assess the impact of implemented programs and explore additional factors influencing inclusivity.

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