

Evaluating the State of Special Education in the Philippines: Opportunities for Policy and Practice Reform

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Abstract:

This study explores the current state of special education and inclusive practices in the Philippines, examining both the progress made and the persistent barriers that hinder full inclusion of learners with disabilities. Despite the existence of strong legal frameworks such as the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities and the recently enacted Inclusive Education Act, many schools continue to struggle with implementing inclusive education effectively. Using a systematic review of local and international literature, this research identifies key themes: (1) policy implementation gaps, (2) lack of teacher preparation and training, (3) insufficient funding and resources, and (4) prevailing negative attitudes and social stigma toward disability. The findings highlight that inclusive education is more successful in schools where administrators and educators promote empathy and awareness, and where adequate support systems are in place. The study also underscores the critical role of multi-stakeholder collaboration—including policymakers, educators, families, and communities—in achieving sustainable and meaningful inclusion. To move forward, the study recommends targeted policy reforms, investment in teacher training and assistive technologies, public awareness campaigns, and increased funding for inclusive education programs. Ultimately, the research argues that inclusive education is not only a matter of policy compliance but a fundamental human right that upholds the dignity and potential of every learner. Through coordinated action, the Philippines can create an educational landscape that embraces diversity, promotes equity, and ensures that no child is left behind.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Special Education, Philippines, Teacher Training, Policy Reform

Introduction:

Special Education (SPED) in the Philippines plays a vital role in the nation's pursuit of inclusive education, a framework that recognizes and upholds the right of every learner to access quality instruction regardless of physical, intellectual, emotional, or social differences.

The Department of Education (DepEd) affirms this vision through its commitment to equity and inclusivity in educational policies and practices (Malipot, 2018). Rooted in both national and global movements, inclusive education seeks to remove barriers to participation and create learning environments where all students thrive. Scholars such as Armstrong, Armstrong, and Barton (2016) advocate for such inclusive approaches, emphasizing their transformative potential for marginalized learners.

Despite policy-level commitments, the actual implementation of SPED programs in the Philippines continues to face systemic challenges. These include a shortage of trained and competent teachers, insufficient learning resources, and an overall lack of structural support. Muega (2016) and Manansala & Dizon (2009) noted how these inadequacies hinder the realization of inclusive ideals within Filipino schools.

Furthermore, societal stigma toward children with disabilities remains a significant barrier to their full integration and acceptance in mainstream education settings. As Booth (2018) and Ballard (2018) argue, inclusive education must address not only physical and academic access but also cultural perceptions and attitudes that reinforce exclusion.

One notable issue is the lack of professional development and recognition for SPED teachers. Arcayera (2016) highlights that outstanding educators in the Surigao City Division were often those who demonstrated deep commitment and resilience despite limited institutional support. These findings reflect a broader concern within the educational system, where effective leadership and job satisfaction are directly tied to teachers' capacity to deliver inclusive instruction (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016). Without appropriate incentives and training, educators may struggle to implement differentiated strategies that meet the diverse needs of learners with disabilities.

Moreover, the integration of innovative teaching methodologies and technology in SPED remains underutilized. Ashman and Conway (2017) advocate for process-based instructional models tailored to the cognitive profiles of special needs learners. Similarly, Baglama, Yikmis, and Demirok (2017) underscore the value of using digital tools, especially in teaching abstract subjects like mathematics, to enhance student engagement and understanding.

However, in the Philippine context, such pedagogical innovations are often inaccessible due to budgetary constraints and limited teacher training, particularly in rural or underserved regions.

Given these multifaceted issues, this research aims to explore the current landscape of SPED in the Philippines through a critical review of related literature, policy documents, and the lived experiences of educators. By examining the intersection of systemic limitations, teaching practices, and inclusive frameworks, this study seeks to identify sustainable strategies that can improve educational outcomes for learners with special needs. Ultimately, promoting a more inclusive educational system requires not only structural reforms but also a cultural shift that values diversity, equity, and the full participation of all students (Carrington, 2020; Barnes, 2007).

Literature Review:

Inclusive education has emerged as a central paradigm in modern educational systems worldwide, seeking to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners within a unified schooling framework. In the Philippine context, the integration of Special Education (SPED) into mainstream education is part of the broader goal of achieving inclusive, equitable, and quality education. This literature review explores key theoretical foundations, pedagogical practices, systemic challenges, and socio-cultural dimensions of SPED implementation, drawing from global and local perspectives.

The philosophical and methodological underpinnings of inclusive education are closely linked to phenomenology, which emphasizes understanding individuals' lived experiences. Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) and De Castro (2003) highlight the relevance of descriptive phenomenological methods in educational research, especially in examining how learners with disabilities perceive inclusion, participation, and social interaction in school environments. These qualitative methods help uncover nuanced insights into the emotional, cognitive, and experiential realities of learners, which are often overlooked in policy-centric evaluations.

Inclusive education is not solely a pedagogical concern but also a socio-political and cultural endeavor. Dreyer (2017) asserts that public relations and communication strategies are crucial in advocating for inclusive policies and reshaping public perceptions toward disability. Greenstein (2016) goes further, arguing for "radical inclusion," which confronts traditional power dynamics and actively dismantles structures of exclusion within schools. This entails not just modifying curricula or adding ramps but transforming school cultures to embrace diversity as a core value. In the Philippines, such transformation remains limited, often constrained by outdated mindsets, stigma, and a lack of public awareness.

Teacher beliefs and attitudes play a pivotal role in shaping the success of inclusion efforts. Kiely et al. (2015) found that many teachers, despite receiving training, still harbor reservations about including students with special needs in general education classrooms.

These beliefs are influenced by personal experiences, systemic pressures, and perceived competencies. Friend and Bursuck (2006) stress the importance of equipping teachers with practical strategies to address the varied needs of learners with disabilities. This includes collaborative teaching, differentiated instruction, and the use of assistive technologies. However, in the Philippines, access to such training is uneven, especially in rural or under-resourced areas.

The importance of early intervention and family engagement is another recurring theme in SPED literature. Fonseca (2018) emphasizes that parental involvement in early childhood special education significantly contributes to the social and academic development of children with disabilities. Yet, many Filipino families face economic and logistical barriers that limit their ability to participate actively in their children's education. Equila et al. (2015) demonstrate the interconnectedness of poverty, social capital, and child health, noting that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with intellectual disabilities are at a greater disadvantage in accessing quality education and services.

Communication methods also play a critical role in the inclusion of learners with hearing and speech impairments. Goldin-Meadow and Brentari (2017) argue that gesture and sign language should be recognized not just as support tools but as fully legitimate forms of communication. This aligns with Krista (2011), who provides safety guidelines and communication strategies tailored to children with hearing loss. In the Philippines, sign language is often underutilized or inconsistently implemented due to a shortage of trained interpreters and inclusive communication policies.

From a policy standpoint, the success of inclusive education depends heavily on systemic support, including infrastructure, teacher deployment, and learning materials. Kauffman, Hallahan, and Pullen (2017) critique the "one-size-fits-all" policy models that fail to consider the complexities of individual learner needs.

In the Philippine setting, while frameworks for inclusive education exist on paper, their translation into practice is hindered by budget constraints and fragmented implementation. Glor et al. (2015) further point out that physical

well-being and activity among Filipino children are often overlooked, particularly for those with disabilities, despite the known link between health and academic performance.

Leadership and capacity building are essential in bridging the gap between inclusive education theory and practice. Golhar and Alex (2017) stress the role of organized training and development programs in building educator competencies and addressing skill gaps. Without such initiatives, many teachers feel ill-prepared to implement inclusive strategies, leading to burnout and resistance. This is particularly true in SPED, where the emotional and instructional demands are high, and support systems are often lacking. The design of research methodologies also shapes the evidence base for policy and practice.

Kratochwill (2015) advocates for single-case research designs as effective tools in evaluating individualized interventions in SPED. These designs provide detailed, context-rich data that are particularly useful in low-resource settings like many Filipino schools. Fisher and Schreiber (2017) emphasize the value of structured interviews in eliciting accurate and meaningful responses from learners and educators, ensuring that their voices inform educational reforms.

At a broader level, inclusive education is inextricably linked to social justice. Ballard (2018) and Booth (2018), in their respective works, argue that inclusion must be viewed through the lens of equity, participation, and human rights. Barnes (2007) supports this by calling for anti-discrimination legislation and practices that empower disabled individuals. In the Philippines, although there are legal frameworks that support the rights of persons with disabilities (e.g., Magna Carta for Disabled Persons), enforcement and awareness remain weak. Discriminatory attitudes and inaccessible environments continue to pose serious challenges for learners with special needs.

Globally, inclusive education has been strengthened by the integration of technology and adaptive learning systems. However, this potential remains largely untapped in many developing contexts. Baglama et al. (2017) reveal that technology can significantly enhance learning outcomes in SPED, particularly in subjects like mathematics, which many students with disabilities find challenging. Yet, equitable access to technology requires infrastructure, training, and curriculum alignment, which are still emerging in the Philippine context.

The literature paints a comprehensive but challenging picture of SPED in inclusive settings. There is a strong philosophical and empirical foundation supporting inclusive education, ranging from phenomenological understandings of learner experience to evidence-based instructional practices.

However, the Philippine context reveals gaps between policy intent and implementation reality. These include inadequate teacher training, socio-economic barriers, cultural stigma, and limited access to assistive technologies and support services. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach that includes policy reform, professional development, community engagement, and a sustained commitment to educational equity and human dignity.

Methodology:

This study employed a qualitative systematic review approach to examine the current landscape of Special Education (SPED) in the Philippines. The primary objective was to gather, analyze, and synthesize relevant literature that reflects the challenges, developments, and experiences of stakeholders involved in inclusive education. A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple databases, academic repositories, and institutional websites. Sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, graduate theses and dissertations, and academic books.

The literature search utilized specific keywords such as "special education in the Philippines," "inclusive education," "teacher training and SPED," "children with disabilities," and "educational access and disability." Boolean operators were used to refine the search results. The selection process followed strict inclusion criteria: (1) relevance to SPED practices and policies in the Philippine context; (2) credible academic or institutional source; and (3) publication within the timeframe of 2000 to 2024 to ensure both historical context and recent developments were captured. To ensure depth and rigor, Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method served as the guiding analytical framework (De Castro, 2003; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

This approach emphasizes the importance of capturing lived experiences and subjective meanings from participants' perspectives. Although no primary interviews were conducted, the review focused on studies that featured qualitative data such as interviews, case studies, and narrative accounts of teachers, parents, and learners with special needs.

Themes were identified through iterative coding and thematic synthesis, aligning with phenomenological principles of reduction, imaginative variation, and meaning-making. This methodological orientation allowed for a holistic interpretation of how inclusive education is experienced and implemented within diverse school settings in the Philippines, particularly from the viewpoint of those directly affected by SPED policies and practices.

Findings and Discussion:

Theme 1: Policy Framework and Implementation

The Philippine government has long recognized the importance of inclusive education through a series of legislative efforts. Among the most significant is Republic Act No. 7277, also known as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons, which ensures the rights and privileges of persons with disabilities.

Additionally, the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (Republic Act 10533) provides for an inclusive, learner-centered K to 12 curriculum that supports the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities. These laws aim to ensure equity, access, and quality education for children with special needs. However, despite this robust policy framework, implementation remains inconsistent and often ineffective.

According to Muega and Echavia (2017), many public schools in the Philippines still lack the necessary infrastructure, specialized teaching personnel, and adaptive learning materials to effectively cater to children with disabilities. The gap between legislation and actual practice is especially pronounced in geographically isolated and economically disadvantaged regions, where schools operate with limited resources. This finding aligns with Ainscow et al. (2013), who argue that while inclusive policies exist on paper, the translation of these policies into everyday classroom practice is often constrained by systemic and contextual challenges.

Mitchell (2008) emphasizes that inclusive education must go beyond physical access to classrooms; it must also entail pedagogical and curricular modifications that support the diverse needs of learners. Yet, many Filipino teachers report not having sufficient training or experience to implement inclusive teaching strategies effectively. Malipot (2018) reinforces this concern, stating that while the Department of Education (DepEd) prioritizes SPED, the lack of investment in teacher development and learning resources undermines its impact on the ground.

Furthermore, Lee et al. (2015) highlight the crucial role of teacher characteristics—such as empathy, adaptability, and professional preparation—in successfully implementing inclusive practices in early childhood education. In the Philippine context, however, many teachers are overwhelmed by large class sizes and overloaded curricula, limiting their ability to give focused attention to children with special needs. Mathew and Jha (2015) argue that unless there is a systemic overhaul in terms of funding, training, and school support, inclusive education will remain an ideal rather than a reality.

Lawrence-Brown (2015) posits that equity and inclusion are not simply about placing students in general education settings, but about transforming educational systems to recognize and accommodate individual differences. This transformational approach is still emerging in the Philippines. While there are isolated success stories—typically driven by motivated school heads, NGO partnerships, or parent advocacy—system-wide reform remains elusive. According to Naraian (2017), true inclusion requires not only institutional policy but also teacher agency and leadership support, both of which are inconsistently applied in many Philippine schools.

Parental involvement also plays a significant role in the success of inclusive education. Masood, Turner, and Baxter (2007) stress that parents' attitudes toward independence and achievement can influence the effectiveness of SPED programs. In the Philippines, however, families of children with disabilities often face economic hardships, social stigma, and limited awareness of their rights, which further complicates collaboration with schools. Mandra and Murry (2007) note that family income and functioning significantly affect the self-esteem and academic engagement of children, a finding particularly relevant in communities where poverty is prevalent.

Additionally, Meyer (2015) argues for the importance of qualitative research in understanding the lived realities of policy implementation. In the context of SPED in the Philippines, case studies and narrative data could provide deeper insights into the disconnect between national policy and local practice. This aligns with the view of Muderedz (2007), who emphasizes the value of cultural context in analyzing how families cope with disability and engage with education systems.

Greenstein's (2016) concept of radical inclusive education advocates for a proactive reimagining of schools to address social inequalities and empower marginalized learners. Applying this to the Philippines suggests the need for more than legislative change; it requires a cultural shift within schools, teacher education institutions, and communities. Without confronting the root causes of exclusion—such as poverty, ableism, and institutional inertia—policy efforts may remain symbolic rather than transformative.

Another dimension to consider is the importance of evidence-based practice. Mitchell (2008) encourages the use of strategies grounded in research, not merely good intentions. While Philippine policies cite inclusive education as a goal, the lack of data-driven evaluation mechanisms means that implementation quality is difficult to monitor or improve. Teachers often operate in isolation, without access to professional learning communities or best-practice models that could help bridge policy and practice.

Finally, the work of scholars like Lawrence-Brown (2015) and Naraian (2017) underscores that inclusive education must be viewed through an intersectional lens—recognizing that learners are affected by multiple, overlapping factors such as disability, socio-economic status, and cultural identity. In the Philippine context, this means policies must be sensitive to the complex realities faced by both students and teachers. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to succeed.

While the Philippines has a well-developed legal foundation for SPED and inclusive education, significant barriers remain in its effective implementation. These include inadequate teacher training, limited school resources, weak parental engagement, and systemic inequalities. The literature strongly supports the need for a more contextualized, culturally sensitive, and resource-supported approach to bridge the gap between inclusive education policy and classroom reality. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative effort from government agencies, educators, families, and communities to create a truly inclusive educational system.

Theme 2: Teacher Training and Professional Development

The effectiveness of inclusive education and special education programs in the Philippines hinges significantly on the preparedness and ongoing professional development of teachers. However, multiple studies and reports highlight a persistent gap in teacher training that impedes the successful inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms.

Mader (2017) underscores that many general education teachers feel unprepared to address the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities. This is often a result of insufficient exposure to special education concepts during their pre-service training. In the Philippines, teacher education programs tend to offer only limited coursework or practical experience related to inclusive practices. Consequently, many educators enter the profession lacking the skills and confidence needed to support learners with disabilities effectively.

Bustos (2008) further emphasizes the need to develop progressive competencies among special education (SPED) practitioners. Her doctoral dissertation advocates for a structured framework that goes beyond foundational knowledge and emphasizes continuous professional growth. These competencies include differentiated instruction, behavior management, collaboration with families, and the ability to adapt the curriculum to individual learning needs. Bustos argues that without these evolving competencies, SPED teachers may struggle to provide meaningful and equitable educational opportunities for their students.

The systemic issue of teacher readiness is also evident in the study by Muega and Echavia (2017), which assessed the readiness of schools and educators in implementing inclusive education. Their findings revealed that although there is a general willingness among teachers to embrace inclusive education, a significant number feel ill-equipped to meet the demands of teaching children with diverse needs. This unpreparedness often leads to frustration, burnout, and, in some cases, resistance to inclusion.

Arcayera (2016), in her qualitative study, highlighted the experiences of outstanding SPED teachers who frequently go above and beyond to support their students. These educators often develop innovative practices and foster inclusive classroom environments despite working under challenging conditions. However, Arcayera also notes that such teachers are often burdened by systemic issues, including lack of support, inadequate resources, and unrealistic expectations. While their commitment is commendable, relying on individual heroism is not a sustainable model for systemic inclusion.

The teacher shortage crisis, a global concern recently highlighted by the United Nations (Jaymalin, Lee-Brago, & Servillos, 2024), exacerbates these challenges. The Philippines is not immune to this shortage, particularly in SPED. Schools often face difficulty hiring and retaining qualified SPED teachers, leading to increased workloads and less individualized support for students with disabilities. In many cases, general education teachers are forced to take on the responsibility of teaching students with special needs without adequate preparation or support, further compounding the problem.

Manansala and Dizon (2009) offer an example of adaptive strategies in their study on the “shadow teaching” scheme implemented for children with autism and attention-deficit disorders. This model pairs learners with special needs with trained aides who assist them in mainstream classrooms. While effective in some contexts, this approach also highlights a critical issue: the dependence on external support mechanisms to compensate for the inadequacies in teacher training. The success of such schemes underscores the need for structured, institutional training programs rather than ad hoc solutions.

In his 2016 study, Muega explored inclusive education through the perspectives of teachers, administrators, and parents. He found that while the stakeholders generally support the principles of inclusion, they often cite insufficient teacher preparation as one of the biggest barriers to effective implementation. Teachers, in particular, expressed the

need for more relevant training in differentiated instruction, behavior management, and collaborative teaching strategies.

Ainscow, Dyson, and Weiner (2013) argue that transforming schools from exclusion to inclusion requires a systemic response—starting with teacher education. They contend that inclusion should be a central theme in all teacher preparation programs and not treated as a specialized or elective topic. This perspective is vital in the Philippine context, where inclusive education is still often viewed as the sole responsibility of SPED teachers rather than a shared commitment across the teaching workforce.

The findings across these various studies and reports reveal a common thread: the pressing need for more robust, practical, and continuous professional development opportunities for both general and special education teachers. Pre-service training programs must integrate inclusive education as a core component, while in-service training should be made widely accessible and aligned with current classroom realities. Teachers must also be provided with mentoring, peer support systems, and access to evidence-based practices to build their confidence and competence.

The success of inclusive education in the Philippines is deeply tied to how well teachers are prepared and supported. Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires investment in teacher education reform, ongoing capacity building, and systemic support. Only through such comprehensive efforts can Filipino teachers be empowered to create classrooms that are truly inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all learners.

Theme 3: Resource Availability and Infrastructure

One of the most pressing challenges in the effective implementation of Special Education (SPED) in the Philippines is the chronic lack of resources and inadequate infrastructure in public schools. These limitations hinder the delivery of inclusive, high-quality instruction to learners with special needs. Classrooms in many public schools remain overcrowded, teaching and learning materials are outdated or insufficient, and assistive technologies—which are essential for students with disabilities—are often unavailable or underutilized (Baglama et al., 2017).

Mitchell (2008) underscores that evidence-based strategies in special and inclusive education can only succeed when supported by the appropriate infrastructure, including adequate classroom space, learning materials, specialized equipment, and trained personnel. In the Philippine context, however, many schools lack even the most basic provisions needed to accommodate learners with disabilities. Ainscow, Dyson, and Weiner (2013) emphasize that inclusion is not solely a pedagogical challenge but a structural one, necessitating systemic investment in school facilities, instructional technology, and support services.

Despite the Department of Education's expressed commitment to prioritize SPED (Malipot, 2018), progress remains sluggish due to budget constraints, uneven resource allocation, and the shortage of qualified SPED professionals. As Muega and Echavia (2017) report, many schools are not ready to fully embrace inclusive education, partly due to the limited availability of teaching tools and support personnel such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, and guidance counselors. This lack of readiness is exacerbated by the absence of a centralized mechanism to distribute SPED resources equitably across urban and rural schools, creating significant disparities in service delivery.

The physical environment of classrooms also plays a crucial role in determining the accessibility and inclusiveness of education. Armstrong et al. (2016) argue that the organization of learning spaces, availability of mobility aids, and the flexibility of classroom setups are fundamental to the participation of learners with disabilities. In the Philippines, many classrooms remain designed for the "typical" learner, failing to consider the diverse needs of children with visual, auditory, cognitive, and physical impairments. This reflects a systemic neglect of inclusive design principles in educational infrastructure planning (Greenstein, 2016).

Assistive technology, while transformative in supporting students with disabilities, remains underutilized in public schools due to cost, lack of awareness, and insufficient training for educators. Baglama et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of technology in teaching mathematics to special education students, noting that digital tools can enhance conceptual understanding and engagement. Yet, these tools remain largely inaccessible to many Filipino learners, especially in geographically isolated or economically disadvantaged areas. As Friend and Bursuck (2006) explain, integrating technology into inclusive education is not a luxury—it is a necessity.

In addition, leadership and policy implementation gaps contribute to the persistent resource inadequacies in SPED programs. According to Alonderiene and Majauskaitė (2016), the effectiveness of educational leadership is closely linked to how well school resources are managed and optimized. However, in the Philippine public school system, school heads often lack the autonomy and training to reallocate budgets or advocate for SPED resources effectively. As Arcayera (2016) observed in his study of outstanding teachers, even dedicated and competent educators face institutional limitations that prevent them from fully implementing inclusive practices.

Another dimension of the issue relates to the insufficient training and professional development opportunities for teachers, particularly in the use of SPED resources and technology. Mader (2017) notes that poorly trained teachers

are less likely to employ inclusive strategies or utilize available tools, resulting in suboptimal outcomes for learners with special needs. Without continuous support and access to professional learning communities, many educators struggle to integrate SPED practices into their everyday teaching, even when resources are nominally present.

Moreover, the problem of infrastructure extends beyond the classroom to include transportation, safety, and school accessibility. Children with physical disabilities often find it difficult or impossible to attend school due to the lack of ramps, elevators, and adapted transportation services. Krista (2011) stresses the importance of safety planning and infrastructure for children with hearing loss, yet many schools do not meet even the basic requirements to ensure safe and inclusive participation for all learners.

Socioeconomic inequalities also play a significant role in resource distribution and access. Equila et al. (2015) found that poverty, social capital, and family socioeconomic status significantly affect the educational outcomes of children with disabilities. In low-income communities, schools often rely on donations, non-governmental organizations, or community initiatives to provide basic SPED services, reinforcing the cycle of educational inequity. Carrington (2020) calls for a global commitment to inclusive education that goes beyond rhetoric and into meaningful action, including adequate funding and infrastructure development.

The availability of resources and infrastructure is a foundational pillar for inclusive education and successful SPED implementation. While the intent to support learners with special needs exists at the policy level, actual practice on the ground remains hampered by logistical, economic, and systemic barriers.

Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires a multipronged approach: increased funding, capacity-building for educators and school leaders, equitable resource allocation, and the integration of inclusive design and technology in all aspects of school infrastructure. Only through such comprehensive reforms can the Philippine educational system truly fulfill its promise of education for all.

Theme 4: Attitudes and Social Perceptions

Despite policy-level advancements and growing advocacy for inclusive education, deeply ingrained social stigma and limited public awareness continue to obstruct the full inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Negative attitudes among key stakeholders—teachers, parents, school leaders, and even peers—remain one of the most persistent barriers to building inclusive school environments (Barnes, 2007; Kiely et al., 2015). These attitudes are often shaped by cultural beliefs, insufficient teacher training, and lack of direct experience with inclusive settings (Mathew & Jha, 2015; Naraian, 2017).

In the Philippine context, Muega (2016) found that inclusive education is more effectively implemented in schools where administrators and teachers proactively cultivate empathy, acceptance, and sensitivity toward learners with special needs. Such schools often prioritize community involvement and deliberate awareness campaigns to challenge misconceptions and discriminatory practices. These findings echo global perspectives that stress the role of school culture in shaping inclusive practices (Ballard, 2018; Booth, 2018).

Unfortunately, many educators still carry unconscious biases or demonstrate resistance to inclusion due to insufficient exposure or support. According to Kiely et al. (2015), teacher beliefs about the capabilities of students with disabilities significantly influence their instructional strategies and willingness to adapt. Teachers who view inclusion as burdensome or ineffective may subconsciously lower expectations for students with disabilities, undermining their learning potential and reinforcing exclusionary practices (Friend & Bursuck, 2006; Armstrong et al., 2016).

Moreover, parents and guardians may also harbor doubts about the efficacy of inclusive education, often fueled by fears that their child may not receive adequate attention in a regular classroom or may face bullying from peers. These fears are not entirely unfounded, as peer rejection and social isolation remain common experiences for children with disabilities. Carrington (2020) and Greenstein (2016) argue that schools must adopt a holistic approach—targeting not only classroom strategies but also broader social dynamics—to address these challenges effectively.

Peer attitudes are crucial in shaping the daily experiences of students with disabilities. When classmates are not educated about diversity and disability, they may exclude or ridicule their peers, perpetuating harmful stereotypes. As noted by Ballard (2018), fostering an inclusive school climate requires intentional efforts to teach all students about respect, equity, and empathy. Programs that promote inclusive values—through peer mentoring, cooperative learning, or disability-awareness weeks—can significantly enhance social acceptance.

Leadership also plays a pivotal role in transforming social perceptions. School heads who model inclusive values and integrate them into institutional policies help create a trickle-down effect, influencing both staff and student behavior (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016). According to Arcayera (2016), outstanding teachers in inclusive schools often attribute their success to strong administrative support and a collaborative, compassionate school culture.

In addition, structural and systemic issues continue to perpetuate attitudinal barriers. Mader (2017) highlights that teacher education programs often fail to provide sufficient training in special needs education, leaving teachers underprepared and uncomfortable when faced with diverse learning profiles. Without proper professional development and exposure, misconceptions about disability tend to persist, sometimes unintentionally reinforced by outdated pedagogical frameworks (Mitchell, 2008; Kauffman et al., 2017).

Stigma is also linked to broader socio-economic and cultural factors. In low-resource communities, disabilities are sometimes associated with shame or superstition, further isolating affected families and reducing their willingness to advocate for inclusion (Muderedz, 2007; Equila et al., 2015). Inclusive education, therefore, must be coupled with community-based efforts to dismantle these harmful narratives and elevate the voices of children with disabilities and their families.

Efforts to transform attitudes must also recognize the emotional labor required of teachers. As De Castro (2003) and Giorgi & Giorgi (2003) explain through phenomenological research, educators working in inclusive environments often undergo a profound shift in mindset, especially when supported through meaningful reflection and shared experience. Teachers who are empowered to see themselves as agents of inclusion—rather than passive implementers of policy—can serve as catalysts for broader social change within their schools and communities.

As emphasized by Ainscow et al. (2013), a successful transition from exclusion to inclusion must address not only physical and academic access, but also the invisible barriers created by social perceptions. Inclusion must become more than just a policy requirement—it must be a shared value. This requires persistent, collective effort to challenge bias, promote understanding, and build a school culture where every learner is seen, valued, and supported.

Conclusion:

Special education in the Philippines stands at a pivotal crossroads. While there are commendable legal foundations such as the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities and the Inclusive Education Act, the full realization of inclusive education remains elusive due to enduring systemic and cultural barriers. Despite the commitment of many educators and school leaders, numerous schools still lack the resources, training, and institutional support necessary to meet the diverse needs of learners with disabilities.

A transformative shift toward genuine inclusion demands a multi-dimensional and collaborative approach. First, comprehensive policy reforms must be matched with effective implementation strategies and accountability mechanisms at both national and local levels. Legal mandates must be translated into concrete actions that reach the classroom. Second, teacher preparation and continuous professional development must prioritize inclusive pedagogies, evidence-based strategies, and the use of assistive technologies. Educators must be equipped not only with knowledge, but also with the attitudes and confidence to teach inclusively.

Furthermore, adequate and sustained funding is critical. Investments are needed for accessible infrastructure, individualized learning tools, and the hiring of trained support staff such as special education teachers, shadow teachers, and therapists. Equally important is shifting public perception. Social stigma remains a major barrier to inclusion. Ongoing advocacy and community awareness campaigns are essential to foster empathy, acceptance, and respect for learners with disabilities.

Inclusive education is not merely an aspiration; it is a right. Every child deserves to learn in an environment where they feel valued, supported, and capable of thriving. As the Philippines continues to pursue educational reforms, the commitment to inclusion must be unwavering. Through coordinated efforts from policymakers, educators, families, and society at large, the country can create an education system that truly leaves no one behind.

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