

Meta-Synthesis on the Lived Experiences of Special Education (SPED) Stakeholders in the Philippines: A Synthesis of Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

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Abstract:

This study explores the lived experiences of stakeholders in Special Education (SPED) within the Philippine context through a qualitative meta-synthesis of existing literature published from 2015 to 2025. Guided by the Thematic Synthesis approach, the research systematically analyzed selected qualitative studies focusing on the experiences of teachers, parents, and learners with special needs. The findings reveal a persistent policy–practice gap in inclusive education, where progressive legal frameworks exist but are constrained by limited resources, insufficient training, and inadequate institutional support. Three major themes emerged: the emotional and professional challenges faced by educators, systemic and infrastructural barriers to effective inclusion, and the need for collaborative support systems among schools, families, and medical professionals. The study highlights that inclusive education is not solely an instructional concern but a social and systemic issue requiring coordinated stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of contextualized teacher training, institutionalized parent–teacher partnerships, accessible SPED resource centers, and mental health support for educators. By synthesizing the human dimensions of inclusive education, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of SPED implementation and offers practical recommendations for strengthening inclusive practices in Philippine schools.

Keywords: inclusive education, special education (SPED), qualitative meta-synthesis, lived experiences

Introduction:

The right to education for children with special needs is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and is strongly upheld within the Philippine educational system. In the Philippines, this commitment is institutionalized through Republic Act No. 7277 (Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities) and the more recent Inclusive Education Act, which collectively mandate equitable access to quality education for learners with disabilities. These policies

emphasize inclusive practices and equal opportunities for participation in mainstream educational settings. However, despite these robust legal frameworks, a significant gap persists between policy rhetoric and classroom realities, particularly in the implementation of inclusive education practices.

Existing literature has consistently identified structural and systemic barriers that hinder effective inclusive education, including inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, and insufficient professional preparation among educators. While these studies provide valuable insights into institutional challenges, they often overlook the lived experiences of key stakeholders involved in special education.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the need to understand the human dimension of inclusion, particularly the emotional demands placed on teachers, the social experiences of learners with special needs, and the adaptive strategies employed by families in navigating educational systems. For instance, meta-analytic and qualitative investigations highlight the complex experiences of children with disabilities in inclusive settings (Paul, 2021) and the challenges faced by students with additional needs during disruptive contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Adolfo et al., 2023).

Moreover, international and regional studies have examined inclusive education practices across diverse contexts, demonstrating both shared challenges and context-specific realities. A meta-synthesis of inclusive education implementation in selected Asian countries underscores persistent issues related to policy implementation, resource allocation, and stakeholder preparedness (Arias et al., 2023).

Similarly, research on the lived experiences of teachers in Philippine classrooms reveals the complexities of addressing diverse learner needs within existing institutional constraints (Macabenta et al., 2023). Comparative analyses of inclusive education models across developed and developing countries further suggest that effective inclusion requires not only supportive policies but also strong institutional and community collaboration (Floranza, 2025).

Parental perspectives also play a critical role in shaping inclusive educational outcomes. Studies examining family experiences demonstrate how cultural expectations, systemic barriers, and communication challenges influence parental engagement and advocacy for learners with special needs. For example, research on Filipino families navigating special education systems abroad highlights the importance of collaborative partnerships between schools and families in promoting inclusive practices (Surio, 2025, Brigham Young University). These findings reinforce the need to examine inclusion as a multidimensional process shaped by interactions among educators, learners, families, and broader social institutions.

Despite the growing body of research on inclusive education, there remains a lack of synthesized qualitative evidence that integrates these diverse stakeholder experiences within the Philippine context. In particular, few studies systematically examine the interconnected emotional, social, and adaptive dimensions of special education practice.

To address this gap, the present study conducts a qualitative meta-synthesis of literature published between 2015 and 2025, aiming to generate a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of special education stakeholders in the Philippines. By synthesizing existing qualitative findings, this research seeks to provide deeper insights into the challenges, adaptive strategies, and systemic factors that shape inclusive education practices and inform future policy and practice.

Literature Review:

Inclusive education has increasingly become a central focus of global and national educational reforms, particularly in promoting equitable access and participation for learners with disabilities. Studies on inclusive education emphasize the importance of understanding the lived experiences of children and youth with special needs within mainstream educational environments.

Using a meta-aggregation approach, Paul (2021) synthesized the experiences of learners with disabilities and highlighted recurring challenges such as limited instructional accommodations, social exclusion, and inadequate institutional support. The study underscores the need for systematic interventions that address both academic and

psychosocial needs of learners, reinforcing the importance of stakeholder-centered approaches in inclusive education research.

In the Asian context, research has documented shared challenges in the implementation of inclusive education policies. A meta-synthesis by Arias et al. (2023) examined inclusive education practices across selected Asian countries and found persistent barriers, including insufficient teacher preparation, limited educational resources, and weak policy enforcement.

These findings suggest that while inclusive education policies are widely adopted, their effectiveness largely depends on contextual factors such as institutional capacity and stakeholder readiness. Similarly, Floranza (2025) conducted a comparative systematic review of inclusive education models in developed and developing countries and concluded that successful implementation requires coordinated efforts among policymakers, educators, and communities. These studies provide a broader regional perspective that contextualizes the challenges faced by the Philippine education system.

Within the Philippine setting, several studies have explored the lived experiences of teachers implementing inclusive practices. Macabenta et al. (2023) examined the experiences of 21st-century teachers and reported that educators often struggle to address diverse learner needs due to limited training and institutional support. Similarly, Alvarez et al. (2025) identified challenges encountered by teachers handling mainstreaming classes in secondary schools, including classroom management difficulties, lack of instructional materials, and insufficient professional preparation. These findings highlight the complex role of teachers as frontline implementers of inclusive education and emphasize the need for capacity-building initiatives that strengthen instructional competence and adaptive strategies.

Teacher preparation and professional development have also been identified as critical factors influencing inclusive education outcomes. Rivera et al. (2025), through a policy discussion paper from the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, emphasized the importance of improving access to in-service training and teacher professional development programs to enhance instructional effectiveness.

Supporting this perspective, Magtuba and Caballero (2024) found that systems leadership, teacher empowerment, and professional commitment significantly influence inclusive education practices among special education teachers. Furthermore, Karaan Jr et al. (2025) examined teachers' awareness and preparedness regarding Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and revealed gaps in knowledge and implementation within inclusive settings, suggesting the need for more structured training programs.

The effectiveness of educational interventions and support mechanisms for learners with special needs has also been examined in recent studies. Perez and Ting (2025) investigated the effectiveness of Individualized Education Plans and highlighted the critical roles of teacher training and peer support in improving learning outcomes for special needs learners. These findings align with broader research emphasizing collaborative and individualized approaches in special education. Adolfo et al. (2023) further explored the experiences of students with additional needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing increased learning difficulties, limited access to support services, and heightened emotional challenges. The study demonstrated how external disruptions exacerbate existing inequalities in inclusive education systems.

Parental involvement has likewise emerged as a significant factor in the educational success of learners with special needs. Pely (2025) explored the lived experiences of parents raising children with disabilities and found that parental resilience, emotional commitment, and advocacy play vital roles in supporting learners' development. Similarly, Michelle et al. (2025) examined parental involvement and self-efficacy, demonstrating that parents who actively engage in their children's education contribute significantly to improved academic and social outcomes. These studies highlight the importance of family engagement as a complementary component of inclusive education, reinforcing the need for strong school-family partnerships.

Cross-cultural perspectives on parental experiences further enrich the understanding of inclusive education practices. Surio (2025), in a qualitative study conducted at Brigham Young University, examined the experiences of Filipino American parents navigating the United States special education system. The findings revealed challenges related to

cultural expectations, communication barriers, and advocacy efforts, emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive educational practices. These insights provide valuable perspectives on how cultural and social contexts shape stakeholder experiences and highlight the need for inclusive systems that address diverse family needs.

Finally, qualitative research methodologies, particularly those focusing on lived experiences, have been widely used to examine complex human dimensions of education and health. While studies such as Tillaman et al. (2024) explored lived experiences in healthcare contexts, their use of phenomenological approaches demonstrates the value of qualitative inquiry in capturing emotional, social, and adaptive processes.

Collectively, the reviewed literature indicates a growing body of research on inclusive education, teacher preparedness, parental involvement, and stakeholder experiences. However, there remains a limited synthesis of qualitative findings that integrates these perspectives within the Philippine context. This gap underscores the need for a qualitative meta-synthesis that systematically examines the lived experiences of special education stakeholders to inform more responsive policies and practices.

Methodology:

This study employed a qualitative meta-synthesis research design, specifically utilizing the thematic synthesis approach to systematically integrate findings from existing qualitative studies. Qualitative meta-synthesis enables the interpretation and consolidation of multiple qualitative investigations to generate new conceptual insights and higher-order interpretations beyond individual studies. Through a structured process of literature search, critical appraisal, and thematic integration, the study aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of special education (SPED) stakeholders in the Philippine context.

A systematic literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Philippine E-Journals, and ERIC. The search process employed relevant keywords and combinations such as “lived experiences,” “SPED teachers Philippines,” “qualitative inclusive education,” and “special education stakeholders.” Boolean operators and manual reference checks were also used to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant studies. The search focused on peer-reviewed publications to ensure the credibility and rigor of included sources.

Studies were selected based on predetermined inclusion criteria to ensure methodological and contextual relevance. Included studies were required to: (1) employ qualitative research designs such as phenomenology, case study, narrative inquiry, or grounded theory; (2) be conducted within the Philippine educational context; (3) be published between 2015 and 2025 to ensure contemporary relevance; and (4) focus on the lived experiences of key special education stakeholders, including teachers, parents, or learners with special needs. Studies that did not meet these criteria, as well as purely quantitative investigations or non-peer-reviewed materials, were excluded from the analysis.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis procedures consistent with thematic synthesis. Relevant findings were extracted primarily from the results and discussion sections of the selected primary studies. Initial codes were generated inductively to capture key concepts and recurring patterns across studies. These codes were subsequently organized into descriptive themes that reflected common stakeholder experiences, which were then further synthesized into higher-order analytical themes. This multi-stage process enabled the development of interpretive constructs that provide deeper insights into the shared challenges, adaptive strategies, and systemic factors shaping inclusive education practices in the Philippines.

Findings and Discussion:

The "Roller Coaster" of Emotional Labor

The meta-synthesis revealed that special education teachers experience intense emotional demands that shape their professional practice and personal well-being. Educators frequently described their work as an emotional journey characterized by both deep fulfillment and persistent stress, reflecting the complex realities of inclusive education.

This dynamic illustrates the dual nature of teaching learners with special needs, where moments of achievement and satisfaction coexist with challenges related to behavioral management, communication barriers, and limited

institutional support. Such emotional labor reflects the broader demands of inclusive education systems that require teachers to balance instructional responsibilities with psychological and social support roles.

A central aspect of this emotional experience is the redefinition of success in the context of special education. Teachers reported that even minimal academic or social improvements among learners—such as improved communication, behavioral regulation, or social interaction—are perceived as significant professional achievements. This perspective reflects a learner-centered orientation that prioritizes developmental progress rather than standardized academic outcomes. Similar findings were observed by Lazaga (2025), who noted that teachers in inclusive settings continuously adjust their expectations to accommodate diverse learner needs, demonstrating high levels of professional commitment and adaptive engagement.

Despite the rewarding nature of their work, teachers frequently experience chronic stress and emotional exhaustion. A major source of strain stems from managing diverse behavioral issues and individualized learning needs, which often consume a substantial portion of instructional time. Studies indicate that teachers in mainstreaming classes face difficulties in balancing individualized attention with classroom management demands, leading to increased workload and burnout (Alvarez et al., 2025). This challenge is further compounded by insufficient training and limited access to instructional resources, which hinder teachers' ability to effectively address complex learner needs.

Communication barriers also contribute significantly to emotional stress among educators. Many teachers reported frustration in working with learners who require specialized communication approaches, particularly in cases where teachers lack formal training in sign language or alternative communication methods. The limited availability of professional development opportunities restricts teachers' capacity to develop these competencies, intensifying feelings of inadequacy and professional strain. Research on teacher preparedness for individualized educational interventions supports this finding, revealing gaps in knowledge and skills related to inclusive practices and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) (Karaan Jr et al., 2025; Perez & Ting, 2025).

The emotional demands experienced by teachers are closely linked to institutional and systemic factors. Limited access to in-service training and professional development programs has been identified as a major barrier to improving teacher competence and reducing work-related stress. A policy study by Rivera et al. (2025), published by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, emphasized the need for sustained professional development initiatives to enhance teacher preparedness and instructional effectiveness in inclusive education settings. Similarly, Magtuba and Caballero (2024) found that teacher empowerment, leadership support, and professional commitment significantly influence educators' capacity to manage the demands of inclusive classrooms.

Comparative studies on inclusive education further suggest that emotional labor among teachers is shaped by broader structural and contextual conditions. Floranza (2025) emphasized that inclusive education systems in developing countries often struggle with limited resources, insufficient institutional support, and weak policy implementation, all of which contribute to increased emotional burden among educators. These findings indicate that teacher burnout is not merely an individual issue but a systemic concern that reflects structural inequalities within educational systems.

The emotional experiences of educators are also closely connected to the broader network of stakeholders involved in special education. Parental engagement and collaboration have been shown to significantly influence teachers' motivation and resilience. Pely (2025) found that parents of children with disabilities demonstrate strong emotional commitment and advocacy, which can serve as a source of encouragement for educators. Similarly, Michelle et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of parental involvement and self-efficacy in supporting learners' success, reinforcing the need for collaborative partnerships that reduce the emotional burden on teachers.

The phenomenon of emotional labor in special education is consistent with findings from other qualitative studies that explore lived experiences in high-stress professional contexts. For instance, phenomenological research in healthcare settings demonstrates how professionals navigate emotional strain while maintaining commitment to service delivery (Tillaman et al., 2024, Central Philippine University).

Such parallels highlight the universal nature of emotional labor in caregiving professions. Overall, the synthesis suggests that while teaching learners with special needs provides profound professional fulfillment, it also exposes

educators to significant emotional challenges that require systemic support, professional development, and collaborative engagement to sustain inclusive education practices.

The Gap of Unpreparedness

Another major theme that emerged from the meta-synthesis is the persistent gap in teacher preparedness for inclusive education, characterized by feelings of being “unheard” and “unprepared” in addressing the needs of learners with disabilities. Many educators reported that they lack sufficient institutional support, professional guidance, and practical training necessary to implement inclusive practices effectively.

This sense of unpreparedness reflects broader systemic challenges within teacher education and professional development programs, where teachers are expected to accommodate diverse learners despite limited preparation and resources. A key concern raised by participants is the disconnect between theoretical training and practical classroom application. Many general education teachers expressed that their pre-service and in-service training programs emphasize theoretical frameworks of inclusion but provide limited opportunities for hands-on experience in managing diverse learning needs.

As a result, teachers often struggle to translate pedagogical principles into effective classroom strategies. Lazaga (2025) similarly found that teachers in inclusive settings experience difficulties in adapting engagement, representation, and expression strategies due to limited exposure to real-world classroom challenges. This gap between theory and practice contributes to uncertainty and reduced confidence among educators in handling special education learners.

The lack of specialization in special education further intensifies this challenge. The findings revealed that only a small proportion of teachers handling learners with disabilities possess formal training or specialization in special education, leading many to rely on “trial-and-error” approaches in instructional practice. Research by De La Peña et al. (2023) supports this observation, emphasizing that teacher qualifications and professional background significantly influence the effectiveness of teaching exceptional learners in public schools. Similarly, Karaan Jr et al. (2025) reported gaps in teachers’ awareness and preparedness in implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), indicating a need for more structured and specialized training programs in inclusive education.

This specialization deficit is not unique to the Philippine context but reflects a global concern in inclusive education systems. Studies examining special education practices in low-resource and geographically isolated areas have identified limited access to specialized training and best practices as major barriers to effective service delivery (Warren, 2018). Comparative studies further show that educators across various educational contexts encounter difficulties in integrating learners with disabilities due to inadequate preparation, insufficient resources, and limited institutional support (Katanani et al., 2023; Ruiyu et al., 2024). These findings suggest that improving teacher preparedness requires systemic reforms that strengthen teacher education programs and provide continuous professional development.

Teacher preparedness is also closely linked to overall teacher well-being and professional effectiveness. Research on teacher well-being in Asia indicates that inadequate training, heavy workload, and unclear role expectations contribute to occupational stress and reduced job satisfaction (Yu et al., 2022). Similarly, qualitative studies on special education challenges highlight that insufficient professional support and limited resources hinder teachers’ ability to provide inclusive learning environments (Allam & Martin, 2021). These conditions not only affect instructional quality but also influence teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion and their willingness to accommodate learners with diverse needs.

The gap in preparedness has become more pronounced in contexts of rapid educational change and technological transition. Studies examining the shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that teachers faced significant difficulties in adapting instructional strategies for learners with special needs, particularly due to limited digital competence and inadequate support systems (Merritt, 2022). Emerging developments in educational technology, including the integration of artificial intelligence in teacher education, further highlight the need for updated competencies and assessment practices to enhance teacher preparedness in contemporary learning environments (Gamusa et al., 2025). These findings demonstrate that teacher preparation must evolve alongside changing educational demands.

The experiences of teacher unpreparedness also reflect broader systemic and institutional issues within educational policy and implementation. A systematic review on the state of special education in the Philippines identified persistent gaps in teacher training, resource allocation, and stakeholder collaboration, which collectively hinder effective inclusive education practices (Reyes, 2023).

Similar patterns of stakeholder concerns have been observed in comparative studies examining perceptions of special education across different cultural contexts, where educators, parents, and institutions share concerns regarding limited preparedness and support (Lee et al., 2024). Parallel insights from qualitative research in caregiving and service-oriented professions further demonstrate how insufficient preparation can intensify emotional and professional challenges among practitioners (Tillaman et al., 2024, Central Philippine University). Overall, the findings suggest that addressing the gap of unpreparedness requires comprehensive reforms in teacher education, sustained professional development, and stronger institutional support systems to enhance the effectiveness of inclusive education practices.

The Dilemma of Identification and Diagnosis

Another significant theme that emerged from the meta-synthesis is the dilemma of identification and diagnosis, which highlights barriers encountered by stakeholders even before learners enter the classroom. The findings reveal that the process of identifying learners with special educational needs is often delayed or inconsistent due to systemic, social, and economic constraints. These challenges hinder early intervention efforts, which are crucial in supporting the developmental and academic progress of learners with disabilities.

The “pre-classroom” phase therefore represents a critical yet often overlooked stage in inclusive education, where structural limitations and stakeholder perceptions significantly shape educational outcomes. One of the most prominent concerns is the issue of late or inaccurate diagnosis among learners with special needs. Participants reported that high costs associated with medical and psychological assessments, coupled with limited access to specialists in rural and underserved areas, often result in delayed identification or misdiagnosis.

These findings are consistent with research indicating that access to diagnostic services remains a persistent challenge in special education systems, particularly in resource-constrained contexts (Reyes, 2023). Similarly, Ajoc (2019) observed that limited availability of specialized services and diagnostic centers in provincial areas of the Philippines significantly affects the timely identification of learners with disabilities, thereby delaying appropriate educational interventions.

The lack of accessible diagnostic services is further compounded by institutional and structural barriers within educational systems. Studies examining inclusive education practices highlight that insufficient collaboration between schools, healthcare providers, and community agencies contributes to inefficiencies in the identification process (Allam & Martin, 2021). Comparative research across different national contexts also reveals that the integration of learners with disabilities is often hindered by inadequate assessment mechanisms and limited professional expertise in diagnosing special needs (Katanani et al., 2023). These findings suggest that the dilemma of identification reflects broader systemic issues involving service delivery, inter-agency coordination, and resource allocation.

Parental responses to disability also play a crucial role in the identification process. The synthesis revealed that educators frequently encounter parental denial or hesitation in accepting their child’s condition, which delays assessment and intervention. This phenomenon is often rooted in cultural beliefs, stigma, and limited awareness of special education services. Studies on parental awareness and perspectives emphasize that some families struggle to recognize early signs of developmental delays or may resist formal diagnosis due to social stigma and fear of labeling (Balaki, n.d.).

Similarly, Lee et al. (2024) noted that cultural perceptions and societal expectations significantly influence how families respond to disability, shaping their willingness to engage with special education services. The challenge of parental acceptance also reflects the emotional and psychological complexities experienced by families of children with special needs. Qualitative studies have shown that the process of accepting a diagnosis often involves stages of uncertainty, denial, and eventual adaptation, which can affect collaboration between parents and educators (Rosales & Rosales, 2019).

Research on stakeholder experiences further demonstrates that effective inclusive education requires strong partnerships between families and schools, particularly in facilitating early identification and intervention (Vicente & Revilla, 2022). These findings highlight the importance of providing support systems and awareness programs that guide families through the diagnostic process.

Teachers themselves face professional challenges related to identification and diagnosis, particularly when formal assessment mechanisms are lacking. Educators often rely on observational strategies and informal assessments to identify potential learning needs, which may result in inconsistencies in referral and intervention practices. Studies on special education teachers' lived experiences indicate that the absence of clear guidelines and standardized procedures complicates the identification process and increases teachers' workload (Damalerio et al., 2024; Jala, 2025). Moreover, difficulties in implementing Individualized Education Programs due to incomplete or delayed diagnoses further hinder effective instructional planning (Aldas et al., 2025).

The dilemma of identification also has implications for teacher well-being and professional practice. Research on teacher well-being suggests that uncertainty in addressing learners' needs, coupled with insufficient institutional support, contributes to professional stress and reduced instructional effectiveness (Yu et al., 2022). Similarly, studies examining teachers' beliefs and perceptions of student growth emphasize that educators' understanding of learner needs is closely linked to their expectations and instructional approaches (Falcon et al., 2025). Emerging innovations in educational technology, including the use of digital tools and artificial intelligence in assessment practices, have been proposed as potential mechanisms for improving early identification and monitoring of learner progress (Gamusa et al., 2025).

The dilemma of identification and diagnosis reflects a complex interplay of structural limitations, cultural perceptions, and institutional challenges that hinder timely intervention for learners with special needs. The findings demonstrate that inclusive education extends beyond classroom instruction and requires coordinated efforts in early detection, family engagement, and inter-professional collaboration. Addressing these barriers demands accessible diagnostic services, enhanced stakeholder awareness, and systematic policies that support early identification and intervention, ultimately ensuring that learners with disabilities receive appropriate educational support from the outset of their schooling experience.

Adaptive Resilience and "Do-It-Yourself" Inclusivity

Another major theme that emerged from the synthesis is adaptive resilience among stakeholders, characterized by the development of "do-it-yourself" or grassroots strategies to sustain inclusive education practices despite limited systemic support. In the absence of sufficient institutional resources, structured training, and specialized services, teachers, parents, and learners demonstrate remarkable adaptability in responding to the demands of inclusive education. This resilience reflects both the commitment of stakeholders and the structural gaps within the educational system that necessitate informal and improvised solutions (Reyes, 2023).

A central manifestation of this adaptive resilience is peer collaboration among educators. Teachers frequently rely on informal peer-to-peer learning, resource sharing, and collaborative problem-solving to address instructional challenges. Studies on inclusive education practices in the Philippines reveal that professional collaboration among teachers serves as a critical support mechanism, particularly in contexts where formal training opportunities are limited (Cagas et al., 2023). Similarly, Arcuino et al. (2022) found that teachers working in inclusive classrooms depend heavily on collegial support networks to exchange strategies, discuss learner needs, and develop effective instructional approaches.

The reliance on peer collaboration is particularly evident among teachers working in resource-constrained and rural settings. Research indicates that educators in geographically isolated areas often develop localized strategies and rely on shared experiences to manage diverse learning needs (Magallanes et al., 2025). These informal learning communities function as alternative professional development spaces that enable teachers to build competence and confidence in handling learners with disabilities. Such practices highlight the importance of collaborative cultures within schools as a means of sustaining inclusive education initiatives (Gaytos et al., 2020).

Another form of adaptive strategy involves the modification of instructional materials and curriculum. Teachers frequently adjust the national curriculum to better align with the specific abilities and learning profiles of their students, particularly when standardized content is perceived as not responsive to diverse needs. Studies on the implementation of Individualized Education Programs emphasize that teachers often exercise professional autonomy in modifying learning activities and assessment practices to ensure accessibility and participation (Aldas et al., 2025). This process demonstrates teachers' commitment to learner-centered instruction despite institutional limitations.

Instructional modification also includes the integration of assistive technologies and differentiated teaching approaches to enhance learning outcomes. The use of assistive tools, visual aids, and alternative learning materials has been identified as an important strategy in supporting learners with special educational needs (Campado et al., 2023). However, research indicates that access to such resources remains uneven, compelling teachers to improvise instructional materials and adapt teaching methods based on available resources (Ajoc, 2019). These findings underscore the need for institutional support to strengthen inclusive instructional practices.

While stakeholders demonstrate resilience in addressing instructional challenges, learners with special needs continue to experience significant social barriers within mainstream classrooms. The synthesis revealed that many learners encounter social isolation, exclusion, and limited peer interaction, which negatively affect their participation and engagement. Qualitative studies on inclusive education highlight that learners with disabilities often face difficulties in forming social relationships due to differences in communication, behavior, and learning pace (Damalerio et al., 2024). Such experiences contribute to feelings of marginalization and reduced academic motivation.

Social rejection and peer pressure further intensify learners' challenges in inclusive settings. Research shows that learners with special needs frequently encounter stigma and discrimination, which discourage them from seeking assistance or actively participating in classroom activities (Rosales & Rosales, 2019). Comparative studies examining stakeholder perceptions also reveal that societal attitudes toward disability significantly influence the extent of inclusion within schools and communities (Lee et al., 2024). These findings suggest that inclusive education requires not only instructional adjustments but also the promotion of inclusive school cultures that foster acceptance and respect.

Cultural beliefs and societal perceptions of disability also serve as significant barriers to full community acceptance of learners with special needs. Studies on parental awareness and community perspectives indicate that misconceptions and stigma surrounding disability continue to shape attitudes toward inclusive education (Balaki, n.d.). Similarly, research on stakeholder experiences in remote learning environments highlights that cultural norms and limited awareness of disability rights affect community support for inclusive initiatives (Vicente & Revilla, 2022). These cultural factors influence both family engagement and learner participation in educational settings.

The theme of adaptive resilience and "do-it-yourself" inclusivity reflects the dynamic responses of stakeholders to systemic limitations within special education. Teachers' collaborative practices, curriculum modifications, and innovative instructional strategies demonstrate their commitment to supporting learners despite structural constraints. However, the persistence of social isolation, stigma, and cultural barriers underscores the need for comprehensive reforms that address not only instructional practices but also societal attitudes and institutional support systems. Strengthening inclusive education therefore requires coordinated efforts to enhance professional collaboration, resource provision, and community awareness to ensure meaningful participation for learners with special needs.

Conclusion:

The findings of this study affirm the persistent "policy-practice gap" in inclusive education, wherein the Philippines maintains progressive legal frameworks for learners with special needs but lacks sufficient grassroots mechanisms to ensure effective implementation. The emotional strain experienced by teachers, as identified in Theme 1, emerges as a direct consequence of inadequate professional training, limited instructional resources, and insufficient institutional support highlighted in Theme 2. This condition creates a cyclical challenge in which educators may appear reluctant to accommodate diverse learners—not out of unwillingness or neglect, but due to a perceived lack of competence and preparedness. Such realities underscore the urgent need to strengthen capacity-building initiatives and systemic support structures for educators.

Furthermore, the study reveals that inclusive education extends beyond instructional practices and should be understood within the broader framework of the social model of disability. The success of learners with special needs is significantly influenced by the educational ecosystem, particularly the level of collaboration among parents, teachers, school administrators, and medical professionals. Effective inclusion therefore requires coordinated efforts that address not only academic needs but also the social, emotional, and developmental dimensions of learning. Without a supportive and interconnected system, the goals of inclusive education remain difficult to achieve.

To address these concerns, several practical recommendations are proposed. First, Department of Education should shift from generic, “one-size-fits-all” seminars toward contextualized, school-based professional development programs. Long-term mentoring, collaborative learning communities, and applied training initiatives can better equip teachers with the competencies required for inclusive classrooms. Second, schools must institutionalize parent–teacher partnerships by developing structured policies that promote consistent communication, shared decision-making, and collaborative intervention planning, moving beyond informal consultations.

Additionally, the establishment of localized resource centers is essential to address disparities in access to specialized services. The government should expand accessible Special Education (SPED) centers, particularly in underserved and rural areas, to provide free or affordable medical assessments, intervention programs, and professional support. Finally, mental health support for educators must be prioritized. Programs that focus on emotional readiness, stress management, and psychological well-being are crucial in sustaining teacher motivation, improving instructional quality, and reducing professional burnout and turnover.

Thus, strengthening institutional support, fostering collaborative partnerships, and investing in teacher well-being are critical steps toward achieving meaningful and sustainable inclusive education.

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