

Filipino Perspectives on Inclusive Education: A Meta-Aggregation of the Experiences of Children and Youth with Special Educational Needs

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18690089

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Abstract:

This study explores the experiences of Filipino children and youth with disabilities within inclusive education settings through a meta-aggregative synthesis of qualitative research. Guided by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) approach, the study systematically analyzed peer-reviewed studies that focused on the perspectives of learners aged 5–21 in mainstream classrooms across the Philippines. Four synthesized themes emerged: (1) the “Kalinga” factor, highlighting the centrality of teacher attitudes and care in fostering belonging; (2) peer dynamics and pakikisama, reflecting both supportive interactions and experiences of subtle social exclusion; (3) physical barriers and bayanihan, revealing reliance on community support to navigate inaccessible infrastructure; and (4) transition to adulthood, underscoring learners’ anxieties about future employment and independence. Findings demonstrate that while Filipino inclusive education shares common challenges with global contexts, it is uniquely shaped by informal support systems and cultural values emphasizing family and community involvement. Policy and practice recommendations include enhancing teacher training through Universal Design for Learning, improving school accessibility, and fostering genuine peer inclusion. The study underscores the importance of listening to learners’ voices to move from charitable provision toward rights-based empowerment.

Keywords: inclusive education, children with disabilities, meta-aggregation, teacher attitudes

Introduction:

Inclusive Education (IE) in the Philippines is grounded in the principle that all learners, regardless of ability, have the right to access quality education within their local communities. This commitment is reflected in national policies such as the Department of Education (DepEd) Order No. 44, s. 2021 and legislative frameworks that promote equitable

educational opportunities for learners with disabilities. Despite these policy advancements, the implementation of inclusive education continues to encounter cultural, structural, and institutional challenges.

Similar to findings in international contexts, there remains a significant knowledge gap concerning the first-person experiences of Filipino students with disabilities in inclusive learning environments. Existing qualitative evidence synthesis studies highlight the importance of understanding learners' perspectives to strengthen inclusive practices and inform policy implementation (Hannes et al., 2018; Paul et al., 2022).

In the Philippine context, the persistence of segregated educational arrangements further underscores this gap. Although policies such as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (RA 7277) advocate for integration, many learners with special educational needs remain in specialized SPED centers rather than fully inclusive classrooms. Current research predominantly emphasizes teacher preparedness, instructional strategies, or parental attitudes toward inclusion, often overlooking the voices of the learners themselves.

This limited representation restricts a comprehensive understanding of the daily realities, participation, and social experiences of children and youth with disabilities in mainstream educational settings. Recent systematic reviews in inclusive education and related fields emphasize the value of centering stakeholder experiences to address systemic inequities and improve educational outcomes (Radzi & Mahmud, 2025; Manuguid, 2025).

Guided by this gap, the present study seeks to examine the perspectives and experiences of Filipino children and youth with disabilities regarding their participation in inclusive education settings. Using the PICO (Population, Interest, Context) framework, the study focuses on children and youth with identified disabilities (Population), their subjective experiences and perspectives (Interest), and inclusive educational environments in the Philippines (Context). By synthesizing qualitative evidence, the research aims to generate contextually grounded insights into how inclusive education is experienced by its primary stakeholders. This focus aligns with broader trends in qualitative systematic reviews that emphasize experiential knowledge as a foundation for improving practice and policy development (Park et al., 2026; Rivero et al., 2025).

This study adopts a Pragmatist philosophical perspective, which emphasizes practical outcomes and actionable knowledge derived from research findings. Rather than merely describing experiences, the study aims to produce evidence-based "lines of action" that policymakers, educators, and local school administrators can use to enhance inclusive practices. The research also draws conceptual inspiration from the "socializing butterfly" model of the Filipino child, which highlights the dynamic interaction between family support and school integration. Within the Philippine sociocultural context, strong familial involvement often supports learners' participation but may also influence the development of independent social relationships within school environments. Similar meta-aggregative approaches in Southeast Asian research have demonstrated the importance of cultural and contextual factors in shaping stakeholder experiences and informing practice (Chatwiriyaphong et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2021).

To achieve these objectives, the study employs a meta-aggregative research design informed by established qualitative evidence synthesis methodologies. Meta-aggregation systematically collects and synthesizes findings from primary qualitative studies while preserving their original meanings, thereby producing credible and actionable recommendations for practice (Hannes et al., 2018).

This approach has been widely applied across educational and health research contexts to generate policy-relevant insights grounded in lived experiences. By applying this methodology to the Philippine context, the study seeks to bridge the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities, contributing to the advancement of inclusive education from mere physical presence toward meaningful participation and empowerment for learners with disabilities.

Literature Review:

Inclusive education has emerged globally as a rights-based approach that promotes equitable access to quality education for learners with diverse needs. The shift from segregated to inclusive educational systems reflects

international commitments to social justice, participation, and equal opportunity for persons with disabilities. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that inclusive education extends beyond physical placement in mainstream classrooms, requiring meaningful participation, social belonging, and responsive instructional practices.

Systematic reviews highlight that inclusive environments must address pedagogical, social, and structural dimensions to ensure equitable learning experiences for students with special educational needs (Radzi & Mahmud, 2025). Qualitative evidence synthesis has played a crucial role in advancing understanding of inclusive education by capturing the lived experiences of stakeholders. The meta-aggregative approach, as articulated by Hannes et al. (2018), provides a structured methodology for synthesizing qualitative findings while preserving the original meanings of primary studies.

This approach generates actionable recommendations by grouping credible findings into categories and synthesized statements. Similarly, Paul et al. (2022) employed meta-aggregation to examine the perspectives of children and youth with disabilities in inclusive settings, revealing the importance of supportive teacher relationships, peer acceptance, and accessible learning environments in shaping students' educational experiences.

Beyond education, meta-aggregation has been widely applied across disciplines to understand complex human experiences within sociocultural contexts. For instance, Chatwiriaphong et al. (2025) explored mental health recovery perspectives in Southeast Asia through qualitative systematic review, emphasizing the influence of cultural values and social contexts on individual experiences. Likewise, Sun et al. (2021) demonstrated how cultural factors shape older adults' adaptation to residential care, highlighting the importance of contextualizing lived experiences within cultural frameworks. These studies reinforce the value of meta-aggregative approaches in generating culturally grounded insights, supporting their application in examining Filipino perspectives on inclusive education.

Recent qualitative systematic reviews further underscore the importance of synthesizing experiential knowledge to inform practice and policy. Rivero et al. (2025) outlined a systematic review protocol examining rehabilitation professionals' experiences in palliative care, demonstrating how qualitative synthesis supports evidence-based decision-making in professional practice. Similarly, Park et al. (2026) examined how employment-based clinical experiences influence professional transition, highlighting the role of experiential learning in shaping outcomes. These studies illustrate how qualitative evidence synthesis can bridge research and practice, providing a methodological foundation for examining the experiences of learners with disabilities in educational contexts.

Within inclusive education research, instructional strategies and pedagogical innovations have been widely explored. Radzi and Mahmud (2025) identified inclusive mathematics practices that promote equity, including differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and learner-centered approaches. Complementing these findings, Manuguid (2025) emphasized the importance of trust-based relational interventions in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, highlighting the role of positive teacher-student relationships in inclusive settings. Similarly, Alit et al. (2025) examined the use of technology in teaching learners with hearing impairments, demonstrating how assistive technologies enhance accessibility and participation in learning environments.

In the Philippine context, research on inclusive education has largely focused on teachers' competencies, attitudes, and instructional readiness. Nunez and Rosales (2021) examined Filipino high school teachers' perceptions of inclusive education, revealing generally positive attitudes but identifying concerns regarding limited training and insufficient institutional support. Raguindin and Ping (2025) further identified key competencies required for Filipino teachers in inclusive settings, including adaptive pedagogy, collaborative practices, and sensitivity to learner diversity. These findings highlight the critical role of teacher preparedness in shaping inclusive classroom experiences.

Teacher preparation and professional development have also been identified as essential components of inclusive education in the Philippines. Lualhati (2022) emphasized the importance of empowering pre-service teachers with inclusive pedagogical skills and diversity awareness. Similarly, Macabenta et al. (2023) explored the lived experiences of teachers implementing inclusive education, identifying challenges such as resource constraints, diverse learner needs, and limited institutional support. Dela Fuente (2021) examined college teachers' experiences working with deaf students, highlighting both innovative instructional adaptations and persistent structural barriers to inclusion.

Studies focusing on Filipino educators abroad and in diverse contexts also provide insights into inclusive practices. Febres and Siy (2025) examined inclusive education practices through the perspectives of Filipino teachers in general education settings in South San Francisco, revealing the importance of culturally responsive teaching and collaborative support systems. These findings suggest that Filipino educators draw on relational and community-oriented values when implementing inclusive practices, reflecting broader sociocultural influences on educational approaches.

Despite the growing body of research on inclusive education in the Philippines, significant gaps remain in understanding the perspectives of learners with disabilities themselves. Existing studies predominantly focus on teachers, parents, or institutional practices, with limited attention to the lived experiences of children and youth in inclusive classrooms.

Given the importance of learner voices in evaluating educational participation and outcomes, there is a need for systematic synthesis of qualitative studies that foreground student perspectives. Addressing this gap, the present study employs a meta-aggregative approach to examine Filipino learners' experiences in inclusive education, contributing to evidence-based policy and practice grounded in the authentic voices of primary stakeholders.

Methodology:

The study employed a qualitative evidence synthesis using the meta-aggregative research design developed by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI). This approach was selected to systematically collect, analyze, and synthesize findings from primary qualitative studies while preserving their original meanings and interpretations. Unlike meta-ethnography, which seeks to reinterpret data through new conceptual frameworks, meta-aggregation aims to faithfully represent participants' experiences and generate practical, evidence-based recommendations. The method is particularly appropriate for examining the perspectives of Filipino children and youth with disabilities, as it ensures that synthesized findings remain grounded in the authentic voices reported in the original Philippine-based studies.

A systematic search strategy was conducted to identify relevant literature across multiple databases and repositories, including the Health Research and Development Information Network (HERDIN), Google Scholar (Philippine-indexed studies), and selected local university research repositories. Search keywords included "Inklusibong edukasyon," "special education Philippines," "qualitative experience," and "bata na may kapansanan."

The study applied specific inclusion and exclusion criteria guided by the PICO framework. The population included children and youth aged 5–21 years with identified disabilities, while the phenomenon of interest focused on their subjective experiences and perspectives. The context was limited to inclusive education settings in the Philippines, excluding specialized SPED centers to ensure alignment with mainstream educational environments. Only peer-reviewed qualitative studies employing methodologies such as phenomenology, case study, or grounded theory were included in the review.

Data extraction and synthesis followed the established JBI protocol for qualitative meta-aggregation. Findings from the selected studies were extracted and evaluated based on their level of credibility, categorized as unequivocal, credible, or not supported. These findings were subsequently organized into thematic categories based on similarities in meaning and interpretation. The categories were then synthesized to generate comprehensive statements that reflect the collective experiences of Filipino learners with disabilities in inclusive education settings. This systematic process ensured methodological rigor, transparency, and the production of actionable insights relevant to policy and educational practice.

Findings and Discussion:

The "Kalinga" (Care) Factor and Teacher Attitudes

A central theme emerging from the synthesis is the "kalinga" (care) factor, which highlights the significant influence of teacher attitudes on the experiences of learners with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. In the Philippines, teachers are often perceived not only as instructors but also as "second parents" who provide emotional, social, and academic

support. Students reported that their sense of belonging and participation in the classroom was largely shaped by the teacher's willingness to modify lessons, demonstrate empathy, and respond to their individual needs.

This relational dimension of teaching reflects the cultural emphasis on care and nurturing within Filipino educational contexts and underscores the critical role of teacher supportiveness in fostering inclusive learning environments. The importance of teacher competencies in promoting inclusive education is strongly supported by existing literature. Raguindin and Ping (2025) identified adaptive pedagogy, learner-centered instruction, and sensitivity to diverse learning needs as essential competencies of Filipino teachers in inclusive settings. Their findings emphasize that teachers who demonstrate flexibility in instructional strategies and responsiveness to student differences are better able to facilitate meaningful participation among learners with disabilities. Such competencies reinforce the notion that effective inclusion depends not only on institutional policies but also on teachers' professional skills and attitudes toward diversity.

Similarly, research on Filipino educators highlights the importance of nurturing and affirming classroom environments. Raguindin et al. (2021) developed a grounded theory describing inclusive environments as engaging, affirming, and nurturing spaces where learners feel valued and supported. These characteristics align with students' perceptions of "kalinga," suggesting that inclusive education in the Philippine context is deeply rooted in relational practices. The teacher's role in establishing trust, promoting respect, and fostering positive classroom relationships is therefore central to the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Teacher preparation and professional development also play a crucial role in strengthening inclusive practices. Lualhati (2022) emphasized the need to empower Filipino pre-service teachers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to address diverse learning needs. Through exposure to inclusive pedagogies and diversity awareness, future educators can develop the competence and confidence required to support learners with disabilities. This focus on teacher preparation highlights the importance of building inclusive values and practices early in teacher education programs.

The lived experiences of practicing teachers further illustrate the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing inclusive education. Macabenta et al. (2023) reported that teachers often face difficulties such as limited resources, large class sizes, and insufficient institutional support when addressing diverse learner needs. Despite these challenges, many educators demonstrate commitment to inclusion by adapting instructional methods and providing individualized support. Similarly, Dela Fuente (2021) found that college teachers working with deaf students employed innovative strategies and accommodations, although structural barriers and limited training continued to pose challenges.

Culturally responsive and community-oriented approaches also shape inclusive practices among Filipino educators. Febres and Siy (2025) highlighted that Filipino teachers in general education settings emphasize collaboration, empathy, and relationship-building as key strategies for inclusion. These practices reflect broader Filipino values of communal support and shared responsibility in education.

In addition, Cucio and Roldan (2020) demonstrated how inclusive initiatives for indigenous learners in alternative learning systems emphasize respect for cultural identity and contextualized instruction, reinforcing the importance of culturally grounded pedagogies in inclusive education. However, studies also reveal persistent systemic challenges that influence teacher attitudes and practices. Espeño et al. (2024) identified issues such as inadequate infrastructure, limited teaching materials, and insufficient policy implementation as barriers to effective inclusion in special education programs.

Similarly, Marohombsar et al. (2026) reported that public elementary school teachers face ongoing difficulties in balancing diverse learner needs with curriculum demands and institutional expectations. These structural constraints often shape teachers' capacity to provide consistent support, highlighting the need for systemic reforms alongside teacher development initiatives.

Broader regional and international studies further contextualize the role of teacher attitudes in inclusive education. Faragher et al. (2021) noted that across Asian contexts, teacher preparedness, institutional support, and culturally responsive practices significantly influence inclusive outcomes.

Arias et al. (2023) also emphasized that supportive teacher–student relationships are a key determinant of successful inclusion across Asian countries. Within this broader perspective, the “kalinga” factor observed in Filipino classrooms reflects both culturally specific practices and universal principles of inclusive education, underscoring the importance of teacher care, competence, and commitment in fostering meaningful participation for learners with disabilities.

Peer Dynamics and "Pakikisama"

A second major theme that emerged from the synthesis is the significance of peer dynamics and pakikisama (getting along) in shaping the inclusive experiences of learners with disabilities. In the Philippines, social harmony and interpersonal relationships are highly valued, influencing how students interact within the classroom. Participants emphasized that acceptance by peers contributes significantly to their sense of belonging, emotional well-being, and participation in school activities. Positive peer relationships were often associated with supportive learning environments, collaborative participation, and increased confidence among learners with special educational needs.

However, while many students reported positive social interactions, some also described experiences of “invisible” exclusion. This phenomenon occurs when learners with disabilities are physically present in classroom or social activities but remain socially marginalized or sidelined, particularly during playtime or group work. Such experiences suggest that physical inclusion does not necessarily guarantee social integration. These findings reflect broader concerns within inclusive education research that meaningful participation requires intentional efforts to foster genuine peer engagement rather than mere classroom placement.

The importance of peer relationships in inclusive environments is supported by studies emphasizing the need for engaging and affirming classroom climates. Raguindin et al. (2021) described inclusive environments as spaces that promote respect, participation, and social connection among learners. Their grounded theory highlights the role of classroom culture in shaping student interactions, suggesting that teachers and institutions must actively cultivate environments that encourage peer acceptance and collaborative learning.

Research in Philippine educational settings further emphasizes the challenges of fostering inclusive peer interactions. Dela Fuente (2021) found that students with hearing impairments often experienced communication barriers that limited social interaction with classmates, despite being included in mainstream settings. Similarly, Lacar (2021) highlighted the need for inclusive language pedagogy that supports communication and interaction among diverse learners, emphasizing that linguistic and communicative accessibility plays a crucial role in promoting social participation.

Culturally responsive approaches to inclusion also underscore the importance of social relationships and community participation. Cucio and Roldan (2020) demonstrated that inclusive education initiatives for indigenous learners emphasize community involvement and culturally sensitive practices that promote social belonging. These findings suggest that inclusive education in the Philippine context must consider cultural values and social norms that influence peer relationships and group dynamics.

Despite the recognized importance of peer acceptance, several studies highlight systemic and institutional barriers that affect social inclusion. Espeño et al. (2024) identified challenges such as inadequate resources, insufficient teacher training, and limited institutional support, which may hinder efforts to promote meaningful peer engagement. Marohombsar et al. (2026) similarly reported that teachers often struggle to address diverse social and behavioral needs due to large class sizes and limited support systems, affecting the quality of peer interactions in inclusive classrooms.

Broader regional research also supports the significance of peer dynamics in inclusive education. Arias et al. (2023) found that across Asian contexts, social acceptance and peer support are critical determinants of successful inclusion, while Faragher et al. (2021) emphasized that culturally responsive teaching practices and collaborative learning

environments contribute to positive peer relationships. These studies highlight that challenges related to social exclusion are not unique to the Philippines but reflect broader regional patterns in inclusive education implementation.

Furthermore, teacher preparedness and attitudes toward inclusion influence the quality of peer interactions in classrooms. Studies examining teacher readiness and efficacy indicate that educators who demonstrate inclusive practices and positive attitudes are more likely to foster collaborative learning environments that support peer acceptance (Gonzaga et al., 2024; Masongsong et al., 2023; Raguindin et al., 2020).

Similarly, research on prospective teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward inclusion emphasizes the importance of promoting positive perceptions of learners with disabilities to enhance social integration (Francisco et al., 2023; Pil et al., 2022). Overall, the synthesis highlights that pakikisama plays a central role in shaping learners' experiences in inclusive education, underscoring the need for intentional strategies that promote authentic peer relationships and prevent subtle forms of social exclusion.

Physical Barriers and "Bayanihan"

A third theme emerging from the synthesis highlights the presence of physical barriers and the role of bayanihan (community spirit) in shaping the experiences of learners with disabilities. In the Philippines, many schools continue to face infrastructural limitations, including the absence of ramps, accessible restrooms, and mobility-friendly learning spaces. Students reported that these structural constraints significantly affected their participation in school activities and daily routines. Although inclusive education policies promote accessibility, the persistence of physical barriers demonstrates gaps between policy intentions and actual implementation in educational settings.

In response to these limitations, students described experiences of bayanihan, where classmates, teachers, or school personnel assist them in navigating inaccessible environments. Examples include peers carrying students up staircases or security guards providing physical support during transitions between classrooms. While such acts reflect compassion and communal responsibility, participants expressed mixed feelings about relying on others for mobility and access. Many learners articulated a desire for independent and dignified participation through the provision of safe and accommodating physical environments.

Existing literature supports the finding that infrastructural limitations remain a major challenge in implementing inclusive education. Allam and Martin (2021) identified inadequate facilities and limited resources as persistent barriers to effective special education practices, emphasizing that physical accessibility is essential for meaningful participation. Similarly, Gonzaga et al. (2024) reported that general education teachers often encounter difficulties in implementing inclusive practices due to insufficient infrastructure and support systems.

These structural challenges highlight the need for institutional investment in accessible educational environments. Family and community perspectives further emphasize the importance of accessible facilities for learners with disabilities. Catubigan (2023) documented the experiences of mothers of children with autism, who highlighted the need for sustainable inclusive practices, including accessible physical environments and supportive school infrastructures. Likewise, Chiu et al. (2023) found that family members identified barriers to rehabilitation and educational access, including limited physical accessibility and insufficient services. These findings reinforce the importance of addressing environmental barriers to support both learners and their families.

The attitudes and preparedness of teachers also influence how physical barriers are addressed in inclusive settings. Research indicates that teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward inclusion shape their willingness to implement accommodations and advocate for accessible environments (Francisco et al., 2023; Pil et al., 2022).

Studies on inclusive practices among in-service teachers emphasize the importance of professional competence and institutional support in responding to diverse learner needs (Raguindin et al., 2020). Moreover, teacher self-efficacy and positive attitudes toward inclusion have been linked to greater commitment to addressing structural challenges in schools (Manimtim, 2024). Philosophical and systemic perspectives on Filipino education also shed light on the cultural significance of bayanihan in addressing social challenges.

Opiniano et al. (2022) describe Filipino educational philosophy as grounded in communal values and shared responsibility, which may explain the reliance on interpersonal support systems in inclusive contexts. While such practices foster solidarity and compassion, Sagun et al. (2022) emphasize that sustainable inclusion requires systematic interventions, including early detection programs, accessible facilities, and institutional reforms. These findings suggest that community-based support should complement, rather than substitute, structural accessibility.

The synthesis highlights the complex interplay between cultural values and structural realities in shaping inclusive education. While the spirit of bayanihan reflects strong communal support for learners with disabilities, it also underscores the urgent need for institutional improvements in physical accessibility. Studies on teacher empowerment and leadership further emphasize that systemic commitment, adequate infrastructure, and policy implementation are essential for sustainable inclusive practices (Magtuba & Caballero, 2024; Siason et al., 2022). Addressing physical barriers in schools is therefore critical to ensuring that inclusion moves beyond charitable assistance toward the realization of independent and equitable educational participation.

Transition to Adulthood

A fourth synthesized theme highlights the concerns of Filipino learners with disabilities regarding their transition to adulthood, particularly in relation to employment and economic independence. In the Philippines, education is widely perceived as a pathway out of poverty and a means of achieving social mobility.

For youth with disabilities, however, inclusive schooling does not always guarantee equal access to employment opportunities. Participants expressed uncertainty and anxiety about whether their educational experiences would adequately prepare them for participation in the labor market, reflecting broader concerns about the long-term outcomes of inclusive education.

The transition from school to work presents unique challenges for learners with special educational needs, particularly when educational systems lack structured pathways for employment preparation. Mendoza et al. (2023) highlighted the experiences of hearing-impaired students who reported concerns about their future employability despite receiving inclusive education.

Their findings suggest that while access to schooling has improved, the development of vocational competencies, workplace readiness, and career guidance remains limited for many learners with disabilities. Educational philosophy and policy frameworks in the Philippine context emphasize the transformative role of education in nation-building and personal development.

Opiniano et al. (2022) describe Filipino educational philosophy as oriented toward social participation, empowerment, and community engagement. However, this ideal is often challenged by structural limitations that affect learners with disabilities, including unequal access to services and limited institutional support. Chiu et al. (2023) further identified barriers to rehabilitation and educational services that may hinder learners' long-term development and capacity for independent living.

Early intervention and continuous support systems play a critical role in shaping successful transitions to adulthood. Sagun et al. (2022) emphasized that early detection programs and coordinated educational support can significantly improve developmental outcomes for children with disabilities. Nevertheless, gaps in service provision and inconsistent implementation of support programs may limit opportunities for learners to acquire the necessary competencies for employment and independent functioning later in life.

Teacher preparedness and attitudes toward inclusive education also influence how effectively schools support learners' future aspirations. Research indicates that teachers' beliefs about inclusion shape instructional practices and expectations for learners with disabilities (Francisco et al., 2023; Pil et al., 2022). Studies on in-service teachers' inclusive practices demonstrate that professional competence and institutional support are essential in fostering skill development and promoting learner autonomy (Raguindin et al., 2020). Similarly, teacher self-efficacy and positive attitudes toward inclusion are associated with greater commitment to preparing students for future participation in society (Manimtim, 2024).

Institutional leadership and systemic commitment further affect the effectiveness of inclusive education programs. Magtuba and Caballero (2024) emphasized that systems leadership and teacher empowerment significantly influence the quality of inclusive practices, including initiatives that support learners' long-term development. Additionally, curriculum innovations aimed at developing global competence and adaptive skills may enhance learners' readiness for future challenges, including employment in an increasingly competitive labor market (Diano Jr et al., 2023).

Technological advancements and personalized learning approaches also present opportunities to support the transition of learners with disabilities to adulthood. Emerging research highlights the potential of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in providing individualized instruction and skill development for students with disabilities (Ahmed et al., 2025). Similarly, the strategic use of technology in inclusive education has been shown to enhance learning accessibility and support independent learning, which may contribute to improved employability outcomes (Chiu & Lim, 2020).

The synthesis underscores the complex relationship between inclusive education and the transition to adulthood for Filipino learners with disabilities. While inclusive schooling provides opportunities for participation and skill development, concerns regarding employment readiness and social inclusion persist. These findings suggest the need for comprehensive transition programs, strengthened support services, and inclusive policies that extend beyond school participation to ensure meaningful economic and social integration for learners with disabilities.

Conclusion:

The findings of this study highlight both parallels and distinctions between the Philippine experience of inclusive education and global trends. Similar to Paul et al. (2022), teacher attitudes and peer interactions emerge as central determinants of learners' sense of belonging and participation. In classrooms where teachers demonstrate flexibility, empathy, and inclusive pedagogical strategies, students report greater engagement and confidence. Peer relationships also play a critical role, as learners navigate both social inclusion and potential forms of subtle exclusion. However, the Philippine context is distinctive in its heavy reliance on informal support systems. Acts of *bayanihan*, such as classmates assisting physically or family members providing constant oversight, reflect strong cultural values of community and familial responsibility. While these practices mitigate infrastructural and systemic gaps, they also underscore the country's under-resourced formal education system, highlighting the need for structural and policy improvements.

The "Butterfly Model" of inclusion provides a useful lens to interpret these findings. In the Philippines, the family wing of the butterfly is considerably more prominent than the school wing. Parents often maintain a visible presence in school life, serving as buffers that support the child's participation and well-being. While this family involvement strengthens the child's security, it may inadvertently limit opportunities for the development of autonomous peer relationships and independent engagement within the school environment. Balancing family support with the child's ability to navigate school life independently remains a critical challenge for inclusive education practitioners.

Several practical implications arise from these findings. Teacher training must move beyond mere awareness of disabilities to the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) frameworks, reducing reliance on individualized SPED aides and promoting broader classroom inclusion. Infrastructural development is equally essential; schools must prioritize physical accessibility to enable learners to navigate spaces independently, thereby reducing reliance on informal assistance. Additionally, programs that actively cultivate genuine social inclusion—beyond mere physical presence—are necessary to foster authentic peer relationships and a sense of belonging among students with disabilities.

Despite the insights gained, this meta-aggregation faces limitations. The scarcity of qualitative studies capturing the first-person perspectives of Filipino learners constrains the depth of understanding. Many studies continue to rely on parental or teacher reports as proxies, which may not fully reflect the lived experiences of the children themselves. Future research should prioritize direct engagement with learners to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced picture.

Thus, inclusive education in the Philippines represents a dynamic journey from “presence” to “participation.” Listening to the voices of learners with disabilities shifts the paradigm from one grounded in charity to one centered on rights, agency, and empowerment. Strengthening teacher capacity, improving school infrastructure, and fostering authentic social inclusion are key steps toward realizing a more equitable and effective inclusive education system that truly enables all learners to thrive.

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