



The Mediating Role of Implementation Barriers in Translating Awareness of SPED Laws into Practice

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Abstract:

The transition from exclusion to inclusive education in the Philippines faces significant challenges despite the existence of robust legal frameworks. This study investigated the relationship between Special Education (SPED) teachers' awareness of legal mandates and their perceptions of how these laws are implemented, specifically examining whether systemic barriers mediate this dynamic. Using a quantitative-descriptive correlational design, the research surveyed educators in Cebu to assess their familiarity with laws such as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons and the K-12 Law, alongside their daily operational realities. The results indicated that while teachers possess a high level of legal awareness, their perception of actual implementation remains neutral, heavily dampened by persistent obstacles such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient funding, and a critical shortage of qualified personnel. Statistical analysis revealed a significant but weak positive correlation between awareness and perception. Crucially, the study determined that implementation barriers do not mediate this relationship; rather, they exist as independent, structural impediments that legal literacy alone cannot overcome. These findings suggest that the current policy-practice gap is not a result of teacher ignorance but of systemic resource deficits. Consequently, the study recommends that educational authorities move beyond information dissemination and focus on tangible investments in infrastructure and human resources to truly actualize inclusive education.

Keywords: *Mediating roles, SPED laws implementation, barriers, special needs education, Inclusive Education, descriptive correlational, Cebu City*

Introduction:

The global scenario of special education has changed tremendously. There's a shift from exclusion to inclusive education which bolsters the rights as well as the educational needs for children with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). This worldwide movement is largely influenced by international human rights frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006), as well as previous declarations, such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education



(UNESCO, 1994), which recognize the right to education in inclusive contexts as a basic human right. Whether on different continents or at different stages of socio-economic development, countries have been challenged with effectively transcribing the obligations imposed by these global rights instruments into national policies and, importantly, translating them into classroom practices. Countries are facing similar challenges of financial constraints, establishing the appropriate infrastructure, and especially dealing with staff shortages, and it is clear that international policy alone is insufficient.

In the Asian context, inclusive education's journey will encounter different yet related challenges that will be shaped by the different socio-economic contexts, cultural practices, and levels of educational development. Many of the countries of Asia such as the Philippines are likely to share similar challenges with other Asian contexts, including size of student population, urban and rural issues, and traditional views and beliefs about disability that vary from reverence to stigma (Sharma & Zeleke, 2015). While the recent regional declarations and initiatives across Asia that have (or are) demonstrating a commitment to inclusive education is seen as a positive step towards inclusion in education, these states have been known to also fall short on walking the talk with budgetary limitations, poor service delivery (too many services too fragmented), and most importantly, little to no localized professional development for teachers throughout the entire inclusive learning process (United Nations ESCAP, 2017). In many of these contexts, inclusive education continues to be an event if it does successfully get established, rather than a process that takes place throughout a student's life in the learning context. Shared experiences in the region suggest that while legislative frameworks are critical in creating and sustaining inclusive learning environments, strong structures, systems are also needed for supporting regulation, continuous capacity building and a shift in societal perceptions of disability.

In Philippines, this alteration is mirrored through different legislations that are directed towards equitable access to quality education for all students, including those who require special educational aids (Republic Act No. 7277, 1992; Republic Act No. 10533, 2013). Despite these legal requirements, putting special education (SPED) laws into practice in Philippine schools involves a complex mix of challenges and opportunities. It is important to understand the views of special education teachers on the front lines, as they are responsible for turning policy into practice. This understanding helps identify strengths and areas that need further improvement in the national SPED program. Filipino SPED teachers work in a unique social, cultural, and economic setting. They face diverse student needs, limited resources, and different levels of administrative support. Their daily experiences and views on special education laws directly affect the education quality for students with disabilities. The previous studies focused more on analyzing policy or understanding statistics. The experiences of teachers were rarely highlighted and missed in the studies (Llanos, Baluyot, & Bessin, 2024). This research suggests that collecting and analyzing teachers' experiences provides better understanding of special needs education legislation in the Philippines. It improves how teachers interpret these laws, the challenges they face in daily lives and what they think are effective implementations of these policies.

The implementation of SPED laws is not a one-size-fits-all process. It is shaped by many factors, such as teacher training, availability of instructional materials, class sizes, parental involvement, and the overall school environment (Sito, 2020). Filipino SPED teachers often lead the charge for their students. They modify the curriculum and work with different groups to create an inclusive learning environment. Their perspectives provide valuable insight into how the law affects real life, and emphasizes the deficiencies between workplace goals, and what happens in class.

The study, therefore, will investigate their awareness of existing laws and their perceptions on how these are implemented in their respective institutions. In addition, this study will look into any mediating barriers that may affect the implementation of the said laws.

Ultimately, the findings of this research may provide valuable information for policy makers, educational administrators, teacher training institutions and other interested party members involved in special education in the Philippines. By increasing the voices of SPED teachers, this study aims to contribute to empirical decision -making,



which leads to more responsive and effective policies and programs that genuinely support the inclusive education of all Filipino children with special education requirements.

Literature Review:

When delving into the perceptions of Filipino SPED teachers on the implementation of SPED laws, it is crucial to acknowledge a body of existing literature that sheds light on various facets of special and inclusive education in the Philippines. These collectively highlight the progress made, the persistent challenges, and the vital role of teachers in shaping the educational landscape for learners with disabilities.

The demographic landscape of Special Education (SPED) in the Philippines is heavily concentrated in the public school system, which bears the brunt of enrolling learners with disabilities (LWDs). Recent data from the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM 2) reveals a critical gap in service provision, noting that while millions of children with disabilities exist nationwide, only a small fraction are enrolled in public schools, leaving the vast majority underserved. In terms of specific diagnoses, the prevalence of behavioral problems and learning disabilities in classrooms is consistent with national trends where "difficulty remembering, concentrating, and paying attention" are among the most common manifestations recorded by the Department of Education. However, a significant challenge remains the lack of formal medical diagnosis; approximately 61% of learners tagged in the DepEd system do not have a medical diagnosis and are identified solely based on teacher observation of manifestations, which complicates the provision of targeted interventions.

The Philippine government has established a robust legal framework to support inclusive education, anchored by Republic Act No. 7277 (Magna Carta for Disabled Persons) and reinforced by Republic Act No. 10533 (Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013) and the more recent Republic Act No. 11650 (Inclusive Education Act of 2022). Studies indicate that awareness of these mandates is generally high among educators, as the Department of Education has actively disseminated policies like DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021 to institutionalize inclusion. However, while teachers are cognizant of the existence of these laws, research suggests a "policy-practice gap," where high levels of legal awareness do not translate into effective classroom implementation due to systemic inefficiencies. The literature emphasizes that while the legal basis for inclusion is strong, the translation of these policies into operational reality at the school level remains inconsistent.

Teacher perception of SPED implementation is often characterized by a dichotomy between social willingness and structural incapacity. Research by Manguilimotan et al. (2024) and others highlights that teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward the concept of inclusion, fostering a culture of acceptance and non-discrimination within schools. However, this positive sentiment regarding school culture often contrasts sharply with negative perceptions regarding technical implementation, specifically the lack of support systems. Teachers frequently report feeling "overwhelmed" and "unprepared," citing a lack of competence in differentiating instruction and managing diverse needs as key factors that dampen their perception of implementation success. The "neutral" perception observed in many local studies reflects this tension: educators want to be inclusive (positive intent) but feel unsupported by the system (negative reality).

Several studies have explored the implementation of inclusive education in the Philippines, which is the primary strategy for delivering special education services. For instance, a study by Crispel and Kasperski (2021) highlighted that inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms has been a major issue over the years, pointing to persistent problems in the SPED program's implementation. This aligns with broader concerns raised by Beltran et al (2025) who identified limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, minimal parental engagement, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of administrative support as key barriers to inclusive education in the Philippines. These findings resonate with global concerns but also reflect unique contextual issues in the Philippines.



Regarding teacher perceptions specifically on inclusive education, research by Arias et al (2023) explored the challenges and opportunities of inclusive education from the perspectives of teachers, administrators, and parents, providing a multi-stakeholder view. Similarly, another study in Northern Samar by Lebeco and Verano (2023) on teachers' perceptions on the implementation of inclusive education in public elementary schools revealed that while teachers highly perceive parental involvement in student progress and their own competence in developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), there are still significant areas for improvement, particularly in capacity building for teachers.

The preparedness and training of teachers for inclusive settings are recurring themes in the literature. Research on teachers' preparedness for inclusive education in the Philippines found that while teachers may have a moderate level of understanding of inclusion principles, many express the need for continuous professional development and hands-on training to effectively manage diverse classrooms and address the needs of learners with special needs (LSENs) (Dilsora, 2024). This suggests a gap between policy expectations and practical readiness, leading many teachers to feel unqualified to teach children with learning disabilities due to insufficient specialized training (Arias et al, 2023; Kartini & Aprilia, 2022; Allam & Martin, 2021).

Resource limitations and infrastructure challenges are consistently cited as significant impediments. Studies emphasize that inadequate funding, lack of specialized teaching materials, assistive technologies, and accessible infrastructure make it difficult for teachers to provide an inclusive and supportive learning environment (Punzalan et al, 2025; Kilag et al, 2025). This scarcity often forces teachers to be resourceful and innovative, creating their own materials, but also contributes to professional stress and burnout.

The impact of major educational reforms, such as the K-12 program, on special education has also been a subject of investigation. While the K-12 curriculum explicitly emphasizes inclusive education, studies like the one on Surigao City National High School found poor implementation in some areas due to less training among regular teachers, lack of curriculum adaptation, and inadequate physical facilities (Arcayera & Ruaya, 2021). This highlights that broad policy mandates require specific, targeted support for effective special education integration.

Furthermore, some research has focused on specific aspects of SPED teacher roles, such as their competence in transition programs for LSENs. A mixed-methods study in Camarines Norte revealed that while SPED teachers showed competencies in livelihood programs, there was room for improvement in vocational skills, and they faced challenges like insufficient support, financial constraints, and stereotypes (De Arao & Fontanilla, 2024). This study further suggests that teacher profile factors like age and length of service significantly influence their competence.

Attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education have also been examined, with some studies indicating marginally positive attitudes, often correlated with factors like age and prior training (Beltran et al, 2021). However, the literature also suggests a disparity between theoretical agreement with inclusive philosophy and practical application, often due to perceived lack of time, behavioral challenges, and inadequate training.

The lack of awareness or clarity regarding specific disability laws among teachers can also be a barrier. While various laws exist, including RA 7277, RA 10533, and the more recent RA 11650, the effectiveness of their implementation hinges on teachers' comprehensive understanding of their provisions. Studies implicitly suggest that if teachers are not fully aware of their rights, responsibilities, and the entitlements of learners with disabilities under these laws, implementation will naturally be hampered (Bani Odeh & Lach, 2024; Woolfson, 2024; Alali et al, 2020).

In summary, the existing literature on special and inclusive education in the Philippines points to a complex interplay of legal frameworks, teacher preparedness, resource availability, and societal attitudes. While there is a strong policy push towards inclusive education, the practical implementation faces significant hurdles, often stemming from resource limitations, insufficient specialized training for teachers, and the sheer volume of learners with diverse needs. These studies collectively underscore the critical need to understand teachers' perceptions, as they are central to bridging the gap between policy and effective practice in Philippine special education.



Statement of the Problem:

This study examined the different levels of awareness of SPED laws and levels of the perceptions on their implementation, and the different barriers encountered by the respondents in the implementation of SPED laws during the different trimesters of the year 2025 in various schools in the Province of Cebu as a basis for an action plan.

Specifically, it sought to address the following questions:

1. *What is the demographic profile of the respondents as to:*
 - 1.1 *school classification;*
 - 1.2 *types of diagnosed special needs in the classroom?*
2. *What is the level of awareness of SPED laws among the respondents?*
3. *What is the level of perceptions of the respondents on the implementation of SPED laws in their schools?*
4. *What is the level of perceived barriers encountered by the respondents in the implementation of SPED laws?*
5. *Is there a significant relationship between the awareness of SPED laws and the perceptions of the respondents on their implementation?*
6. *Do implementation barriers significantly mediate the relationship between the respondents' awareness of SPED laws and their perceptions of their implementation?*
7. *Based on the findings of the study, what action plan may be crafted?*

Methodology:

This study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design to examine the level of awareness of Special Education (SPED) laws, perceptions of their implementation, and the barriers encountered by Filipino SPED teachers. The design was selected because it allows the researcher to describe existing conditions and determine the relationships among variables without manipulating them. Specifically, the study investigated whether a significant relationship exists between teachers' awareness of SPED laws and their perceptions of implementation, while also examining the mediating role of barriers encountered in implementing these laws. The study was anchored on the Input–Process–Output (IPO) Model of Von Bertalanffy (1972), wherein the inputs consisted of respondents' demographic profiles, awareness of SPED laws, perceptions of implementation, and perceived barriers; the process involved data collection, analysis, and interpretation; and the output was the development of an action plan based on the findings.

The research was conducted at the Cebu Technological University, particularly within the Graduate Teacher Education (GTE) programs of the College of Education. Recognized for its academic excellence and strong emphasis on teacher education, the university provides graduate programs that enhance educators' professional competencies, including the Master of Education major in Special Education. The respondents were 181 teachers enrolled in the Master of Education major in SPED, selected through purposive sampling. These teachers came from various public and private schools across the region, allowing the study to capture diverse perspectives on the implementation of SPED laws in different educational settings.

Data were collected using a combination of adopted and researcher-made questionnaires administered through Google Forms. The instrument consisted of four parts: respondents' demographic profile, awareness of SPED laws, perceptions of SPED law implementation, and perceived barriers to implementation. Adopted instruments were sourced from Garcia (2023), while the researcher-developed section underwent pilot testing and reliability assessment using Cronbach's alpha. Data gathering was conducted in three phases: preliminary, data gathering, and post-data gathering. Following approval from the College of Education administration, survey links were distributed through Google Classroom, and responses were encoded and processed for analysis. Statistical tools such as frequency count, percentage, rank, weighted mean, Pearson's product-moment correlation, and regression analysis using the Preacher and Hayes mediation approach were utilized to analyze the data and determine significant



relationships among variables. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were observed throughout the study. The findings served as the basis for the formulation of a proposed action plan to strengthen awareness and implementation of SPED laws in educational institutions.

Results:

The study revealed several important findings regarding teachers' awareness of SPED laws, their perceptions of implementation, and the barriers encountered in implementing inclusive education. Results showed that respondents demonstrated a **high level of awareness of SPED laws (WM = 3.83)**, particularly the K–12 Law and the Inclusive Education Act. Despite this high level of awareness, teachers reported only neutral perceptions regarding the implementation of SPED laws in their schools (WM = 3.21), suggesting a gap between policy knowledge and actual practice. The study further found that implementation barriers were often encountered (WM = 3.69), indicating that challenges in resources, staffing, and institutional support continue to affect the delivery of inclusive education. Across all areas, a consistent pattern emerged showing that while teachers generally understand and support inclusive education policies, systemic limitations hinder their effective implementation.

Awareness of SPED Laws – Teachers exhibited strong awareness of major SPED laws and policies, with the highest level of awareness observed for Republic Act No. 10533 or the K–12 Law. Awareness of Republic Act No. 11650, the Inclusive Education Act, was likewise high, reflecting teachers' familiarity with current legal mandates supporting learners with disabilities. However, awareness of more specialized laws such as the Filipino Sign Language Act was comparatively lower, suggesting that teachers are more familiar with broad educational policies than disability-specific legislation.

Perceptions of SPED Law Implementation – Respondents perceived the implementation of SPED laws as only moderately successful. Teachers reported positive perceptions regarding school acceptance, non-discrimination, and inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. However, concerns emerged regarding the shortage of trained SPED teachers and support staff, lack of instructional materials, and limited support services. These findings indicate that schools are generally supportive of inclusive education but often lack the resources needed for full implementation.

Implementation Barriers – Teachers frequently encountered barriers related to overcrowded classrooms, insufficient numbers of qualified SPED personnel, inadequate funding, limited specialized instructional materials, and lack of assessment tools and diagnostic services. These challenges highlight the continuing resource and capacity limitations experienced by schools in implementing inclusive education programs.

Relationship Between Awareness and Implementation – Statistical analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between awareness of SPED laws and perceptions of implementation ($r = .264$, $p < .05$). Although the relationship was weak, it suggests that teachers with greater awareness tend to have slightly more favorable perceptions regarding implementation. However, awareness alone was insufficient to overcome the practical challenges experienced in schools.

Discussion

The results highlight the importance of legal awareness in promoting positive perceptions toward inclusive education. Teachers demonstrated a high level of familiarity with SPED laws, particularly those directly connected to curriculum reforms and educational mandates. This suggests that policy dissemination efforts by educational authorities have been effective in increasing teachers' knowledge of inclusive education requirements. However, the findings also indicate that awareness alone does not guarantee successful implementation.

The neutral perception of SPED law implementation reflects a common challenge in inclusive education where policies are well established but difficult to operationalize because of limited resources and institutional support.



While schools generally foster acceptance and inclusion of learners with disabilities, the shortage of trained SPED teachers and support personnel continues to constrain effective service delivery. This suggests that schools may be socially inclusive but remain structurally underprepared to meet the full requirements of inclusive education.

The barriers identified by teachers further emphasize the systemic nature of implementation challenges. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate funding, lack of instructional materials, and insufficient professional development opportunities create obstacles that affect teachers' ability to provide individualized support for learners with disabilities. These findings indicate that improving inclusive education requires not only policy awareness but also substantial investments in staffing, facilities, instructional resources, and administrative support.

The significant relationship between awareness and perceptions of implementation suggests that teachers who better understand SPED laws tend to view implementation more positively. However, the weak strength of this relationship demonstrates that perceptions are influenced by many factors beyond legal knowledge. The mediation analysis further revealed that implementation barriers do not significantly explain the relationship between awareness and perceptions, indicating that teachers' understanding of SPED laws directly influences their views regardless of the challenges they encounter. Nevertheless, these barriers continue to shape teachers' daily experiences and remain major obstacles to successful implementation.

Findings

Key findings revealed that teachers possess a high level of awareness of SPED laws and generally support the principles of inclusive education. However, awareness does not necessarily translate into effective implementation, as teachers reported only neutral perceptions regarding how SPED laws are carried out in their schools. The most commonly identified barriers were shortages of qualified SPED teachers and support staff, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate funding, and limited access to specialized instructional resources. Although awareness of SPED laws was significantly related to perceptions of implementation, the relationship was weak, suggesting that knowledge alone is insufficient to improve inclusive education practices.

The findings further indicate that successful implementation of SPED laws requires more than policy dissemination and teacher awareness. Schools need adequate human resources, continuous professional development, accessible facilities, instructional materials, and strong administrative support to effectively meet the needs of learners with disabilities. Addressing these systemic barriers is essential to bridging the gap between inclusive education policies and classroom realities and ensuring that all learners receive equitable educational opportunities.

Conclusion:

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that while teachers in the Philippine educational system possess adequate awareness of SPED laws, this awareness does not necessarily translate into positive perceptions of implementation. Teachers' experiences are significantly shaped by the conditions under which SPED policies are implemented, particularly the availability of resources, personnel, and administrative support. Awareness contributes to understanding and acceptance of inclusive education policies, but it is insufficient to overcome persistent system-level barriers.

Furthermore, the absence of a mediating role of implementation barriers suggests that these challenges exist regardless of teachers' level of awareness. This underscores the reality that SPED implementation issues are deeply embedded within institutional and structural contexts. To bridge the gap between policy intent and practice, inclusive education reforms must be supported by sustained investments, strong leadership, and coordinated efforts across different levels of the education system.

Recommendations



Based on the findings, it is recommended that DepEd and school administrators strengthen the actual implementation of SPED policies by addressing key systemic gaps rather than focusing mainly on awareness. Priority should be given to increasing the number of qualified SPED teachers and support staff, as well as ensuring the consistent availability of assistive learning materials, assessment tools, and accessible classroom resources. Continuous, practice-based professional development through INSET and SLAC sessions should also be strengthened to better equip teachers in handling diverse learning needs.

In addition, schools should enhance monitoring and evaluation systems to focus on the quality of SPED implementation and learner outcomes, not just compliance. Stronger collaboration with parents, LGUs, and community stakeholders should be institutionalized to expand support for learners with disabilities. Future studies may further explore context-specific interventions that can help schools address persistent resource and capacity constraints in implementing inclusive education effectively.

Output of the Study

The study presents a Special Education (SPED) Action Plan Matrix designed to strengthen the implementation of inclusive education in Philippine public schools through practical, low-cost, and school-based strategies. The plan focuses on four key areas: establishing a school-based SPED committee to assess learner needs and resources, integrating SPED-focused training into regular INSET and SLAC sessions to enhance teacher capacity, improving administrative support through quarterly monitoring and the allocation of funds for localized instructional materials, and strengthening stakeholder collaboration through regular orientations and partnerships with parents, LGUs, and community members. Implementation is structured as a continuous yearly cycle within existing DepEd systems, ensuring that activities are sustainable and resource-efficient. Overall, the action plan aims to reduce barriers in resources, training, and governance while translating teachers' legal awareness into more effective and inclusive classroom practices for learners with special needs.

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