



Inclusive Education: A Systematic Review of Special Education in the Philippines

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12605694>

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Abstract:

This systematic review examines the state of special education in the Philippines, focusing on legal frameworks, Department of Education (DepEd) policies, and associated challenges. Despite strong legal mandates, implementation gaps persist, particularly in resource allocation and infrastructure. Inadequate teacher training and limited stakeholder engagement further hinder inclusive education efforts. The review identifies key challenges, including the shortage of SPED centers and trained teachers, infrastructure deficiencies, and insufficient support systems. Findings underscore the need for improved policy implementation, comprehensive teacher training, and enhanced stakeholder collaboration. Addressing these challenges is crucial to create inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities. Policymakers, educators, and stakeholders must work together to overcome barriers and ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners, aligning with international standards and constitutional mandates.

Keywords: special education, inclusive education, Philippines, legal frameworks, Department of Education

Introduction:

The right to education for children with special needs is a fundamental human right recognized globally. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) explicitly states in Article 26 that everyone has the right to education (United Nations, 1948). Similarly, the 1987 Philippine Constitution ensures that the state shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels (Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, 1987). In alignment with these mandates, the Philippines has enacted several laws to support special education, including Republic Act No. 7277, known as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons, and Republic Act No. 11650, which focuses on the inclusion and services for learners with disabilities (Republic of the Philippines, 1992; Republic of the Philippines, 2022).

Despite these legislative efforts, the implementation of special education in the Philippines faces significant challenges. The Department of Education (DepEd) has issued several orders to enhance special education, such as DepEd Order No. 11, s. 2000, which mandates the establishment of at least one special education center per school



division, and DepEd Order No. 6, s. 2006, which requires secondary schools to offer special education programs (Department of Education, 2000; Department of Education, 2006). The K to 12 Basic Education Program, introduced in 2013, further emphasizes inclusive education as a core principle (Department of Education, 2013). However, the lack of sufficient special education centers and trained teachers has hindered the full realization of these policies (Wong & Alcantara-Doroja, 2015; Niro & Petilla, 2019).

Inclusive education aims to integrate children with special needs into mainstream classrooms, promoting their participation in the community. However, the reality in Philippine public schools often falls short of this ideal. Many learners with special needs are taught by general education teachers who may lack the necessary training in special education. This situation is compounded by the scarcity of specialized instructional materials and support services (Formoso, 2019; Roxas et al., 2019).

This systematic review aims to synthesize existing literature on the state of special education in the Philippines, focusing on the challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive education. By examining studies conducted from 2013 onwards, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the current landscape and offer insights to guide future research and policy development.

Literature Review:

The Philippines has made significant strides in establishing a legal framework to support the education of children with special needs. This effort aligns with both international and national mandates, ensuring that every child, regardless of their abilities, has access to quality education.

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, articulates the right to education for all individuals. Article 26 states that "everyone has the right to education" and emphasizes that education should be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (United Nations, 1948). This declaration has been a cornerstone for many countries, including the Philippines, in formulating their educational policies.

The 1987 Philippine Constitution reinforces this international commitment through its provisions. Article XIV, Section 1, asserts that "the State shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels and shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all" (Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, 1987). This constitutional guarantee underpins various laws and policies aimed at ensuring inclusive education.

Enacted in 1992, Republic Act No. 7277, also known as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons, is a significant legislative measure that underscores the country's commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs). This act mandates that the State shall provide PWDs with adequate access to quality education and ample opportunities for them to develop their skills and potentials. It specifically requires the integration of PWDs into mainstream educational institutions and the establishment of special schools when necessary (Republic of the Philippines, 1992).

Republic Act No. 11650, enacted in 2022, further strengthens the commitment to inclusive education. This law focuses on the inclusion and services for learners with disabilities in support of inclusive education. It mandates that all educational institutions provide appropriate and reasonable accommodations to ensure that learners with disabilities have equal access to education. The act also requires the development and implementation of individualized education programs (IEPs) tailored to the specific needs of each learner with a disability (Republic of the Philippines, 2022).

The Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines has issued several policies and guidelines to operationalize these legal mandates and ensure the effective implementation of special education programs.

DepEd Order No. 11, s. 2000, mandates the establishment of at least one special education (SPED) center in each school division. These SPED centers are designed to cater to the unique needs of children with disabilities and provide them with specialized instructional materials and trained personnel. The order emphasizes the importance of integrating children with special needs into mainstream schools whenever possible, while also providing the necessary support services to facilitate their learning (Department of Education, 2000).

DepEd Order No. 6, s. 2006, extends the mandate of special education programs to secondary schools. This order requires all secondary schools to offer special education programs and ensure that students with disabilities receive appropriate accommodations and support. The policy highlights the importance of training general education teachers in special education methodologies to better support inclusive education (Department of Education, 2006).



The introduction of the K to 12 Basic Education Program in 2013 marked a significant shift in the Philippine education system. This program, which extends the basic education cycle to 12 years, is founded on the principle of inclusive education. It aims to ensure that all learners, including those with special needs, receive a quality education that prepares them for higher education, employment, and entrepreneurship (Department of Education, 2013). The program includes provisions for differentiated instruction, curriculum adaptation, and the use of assistive technologies to support learners with disabilities.

DepEd Order No. 21, s. 2020, provides guidelines on the utilization of SPED funds to ensure that financial resources are effectively allocated to support the education of learners with disabilities. This order mandates that SPED funds be used for the procurement of specialized instructional materials, the training of teachers in special education, and the development of accessible infrastructure in schools. The policy also emphasizes the need for regular monitoring and evaluation of SPED programs to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability (Department of Education, 2020).

One of the major challenges is the shortage of trained special education teachers. Many schools, especially in rural areas, do not have enough qualified teachers to support the needs of learners with disabilities. This shortage is exacerbated by the limited opportunities for professional development and training in special education (Formoso, 2019). As a result, general education teachers, who may lack the necessary skills and knowledge, are often tasked with teaching students with special needs.

While DepEd has mandated the establishment of SPED centers in each school division, the actual number of these centers remains inadequate to meet the demand. According to Wong and Alcantara-Doroja (2015) there are only 648 SPED centers and ordinary schools offering inclusive education across the country. This number is insufficient given the growing population of children with disabilities.

The lack of specialized instructional materials and accessible facilities is another significant barrier to effective special education. Many schools do not have the resources to provide appropriate learning aids, assistive technologies, and accessible infrastructure for learners with disabilities. This inadequacy hinders the ability of these learners to fully participate in educational activities and achieve their full potential (Roxas et al., 2019).

Effective inclusive education requires the active involvement of parents and the community. However, many parents of children with disabilities lack the necessary knowledge and skills to support their children's education. Additionally, societal attitudes and perceptions about disabilities often create barriers to the inclusion of these children in mainstream educational settings. Advocacy and awareness programs are needed to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for learners with disabilities (Blackman & Mahon, 2016).

Adequate funding is crucial for the successful implementation of special education programs. However, many schools face financial constraints that limit their ability to provide the necessary services and support for learners with disabilities. The allocation of SPED funds, while mandated by policy, is often insufficient to cover the costs of specialized materials, teacher training, and accessible infrastructure (Niro & Petilla, 2019).

The Philippines has established a robust legal and policy framework to support special education, reflecting its commitment to inclusive education as articulated in both international and national mandates. However, the implementation of these policies faces significant challenges, including a shortage of trained teachers, insufficient SPED centers, inadequate instructional materials, and funding constraints. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from the government, educational institutions, parents, and the community to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities, have access to quality education.

Methodology:

This study utilized a systematic review approach to examine and assess the current literature regarding special education in the Philippines, focusing particularly on the legal framework and policies implemented by the Department of Education (DepEd). A systematic review was chosen to ensure a comprehensive and unbiased summary of available evidence.

For the literature search, various academic databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, ERIC, and JSTOR were utilized. Search terms included combinations of keywords like "special education," "Philippines," "legal framework," "Department of Education," "inclusive education," "policies," and "special education centers," with Boolean operators used to refine the search.

Inclusion criteria were set to select relevant studies, including peer-reviewed journals or official government publications focusing on special education in the Philippines, discussing legal frameworks, policies, and published in English between 2000 and 2023 to cover recent developments.



The data collection process involved identification of relevant studies from the initial search, screening of titles and abstracts, retrieving full-text versions for further screening based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, and data extraction using a standardized form capturing key information.

The quality assessment of included studies was conducted using a modified version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. Criteria included assessing the clarity of research questions, appropriateness of methodology, rigor of data collection, thoroughness of analysis, clarity and significance of findings, and relevance to the research questions of the systematic review.

Findings and Discussion:

Inadequate Implementation of Legal Mandates

Despite the existence of a comprehensive legal framework supporting special education in the Philippines, such as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (Republic Act No. 7277) and the Enhanced Basic Education Act (Republic Act No. 10533), there are evident challenges in translating these policies into effective practices. The systematic review highlights a significant gap between policy intentions and their implementation on the ground, particularly concerning resource allocation and the establishment of Special Education (SPED) centers.

For example, Formoso (2019) observed discrepancies between mandated provisions and actual implementation regarding SPED centers. Although DepEd Order No. 11, s. 2000 mandates the presence of SPED centers in each school division, the actual number falls short of requirements. Only 648 operational SPED centers serve both elementary and high school students nationwide, indicating a substantial deficit in infrastructure (Wong & Alcantara-Doroja, 2015).

This gap underscores the need for more rigorous monitoring and support mechanisms to ensure compliance with legal mandates and to bridge the divide between policy and practice in special education.

Insufficient Training and Professional Development for Teachers

The systematic review underscores a critical issue plaguing special education in the Philippines: the shortage of adequately trained teachers. This shortage significantly affects the quality of inclusive education, as many general education teachers are tasked with instructing learners with special needs despite lacking essential specialized training.

Alfane's (2020) study conducted in Legazpi City highlighted this issue, revealing that only a small percentage of SPED teachers possess advanced degrees or specialized qualifications. This shortage is not confined to a specific area but reflects a broader national trend. Costello & Boyle (2013) further emphasized the inadequacies in pre-service training programs, where modules on inclusive education are often lacking, leaving educators feeling ill-prepared to cater to students with disabilities effectively.

Moreover, the review found that in-service professional development opportunities are limited, exacerbating the skills gap among teachers. Leal (2022) noted that existing training programs fail to address the practical challenges faced by teachers in inclusive classrooms. Without targeted professional development initiatives, teachers may struggle to implement inclusive practices and provide appropriate support to students with special needs.

The shortage of trained SPED teachers and inadequate pre-service and in-service training programs pose significant barriers to effective special education delivery in the Philippines. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, receive quality education and support tailored to their needs.

Alfane's (2020) study conducted in Legazpi City highlighted the stark reality of the shortage of trained SPED teachers. The study found that only a small percentage of SPED teachers in Legazpi City possess advanced degrees or specialized qualifications in special education. Similar trends are observed nationwide, indicating a systemic issue rather than a localized one.

This shortage of trained SPED teachers has serious implications for inclusive education. General education teachers, who often lack specialized training in addressing the needs of students with disabilities, are frequently tasked with teaching these learners. Without proper training, educators may struggle to provide appropriate support and accommodations, hindering the learning progress of students with special needs.

Costello & Boyle (2013) highlighted the inadequacies present in pre-service training programs for teachers, particularly concerning inclusive education. Their study revealed that modules on inclusive education are often lacking or insufficient in these programs. As a result, educators graduate feeling ill-prepared to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities effectively.



Pre-service training plays a crucial role in equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to support inclusive education. However, the current deficiencies in these programs contribute to the skills gap among educators, perpetuating the challenges faced in special education.

In-service professional development is essential for teachers to continuously improve their skills and stay updated with best practices, especially in the dynamic field of special education. However, the review found that existing training programs often fall short in addressing the practical challenges faced by teachers in inclusive classrooms.

Leal (2022) noted that in-service professional development opportunities are limited and do not adequately address the specific needs of teachers working with students with disabilities. Without targeted training initiatives, educators may struggle to implement effective inclusive practices and provide the necessary support to students.

The shortage of trained SPED teachers and inadequacies in training programs call for comprehensive reforms in teacher education and professional development. Providing specialized training modules on inclusive education during pre-service programs is essential to better prepare teachers for diverse classrooms.

There is a need to expand and enhance in-service professional development opportunities tailored to the needs of educators working with students with disabilities. These programs should focus on practical strategies, accommodations, and interventions for inclusive teaching.

Limited Stakeholder Engagement and Support

The systematic review underscores the critical importance of engaging various stakeholders in the education of learners with special needs. However, several studies have pointed out significant challenges and limitations in this area, which hinder effective inclusive education practices in the Philippines.

Blackman and Mahon (2016) highlighted the lack of parental involvement as a major challenge. The study emphasized that many parents of children with special needs face limited knowledge about how to support their children's education, along with financial constraints. This lack of parental involvement negatively impacts the learning outcomes of students with disabilities and creates barriers to their academic success.

Furthermore, Niro and Petilla (2019) emphasized the need for better coordination with local government units and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to secure funding and resources for Special Education (SPED) programs. The study pointed out that without adequate support from government agencies and NGOs, schools struggle to provide necessary resources and accommodations for students with special needs. The absence of a cohesive strategy for stakeholder engagement leads to fragmented efforts and hinders the comprehensive support required for effective inclusive education.

Blackman and Mahon (2016) study shed light on the challenges related to parental involvement in the education of children with special needs. The study revealed that many parents lack the necessary knowledge and resources to support their children's learning effectively. Financial constraints often prevent parents from accessing support services or participating in their children's education actively. This lack of parental involvement can have detrimental effects on the academic and social development of students with disabilities.

Niro and Petilla (2019) highlighted the challenges associated with securing funding and resources for SPED programs. The study emphasized the importance of better coordination between educational institutions, local government units, and NGOs to address these challenges effectively. Without adequate support from government agencies and NGOs, SPED programs struggle to provide necessary resources such as assistive devices, specialized instruction, and support services for students with special needs.

The absence of a cohesive strategy for stakeholder engagement results in fragmented efforts across different levels of the education system. Without clear guidelines and coordination mechanisms, efforts to support learners with special needs remain disjointed and inconsistent. This lack of coordination exacerbates the challenges faced by schools and educators in providing inclusive education.

Challenges in Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

Creating an inclusive learning environment is fundamental to the goals of special education policies in the Philippines. However, the systematic review revealed significant challenges hindering the realization of this goal, particularly in mainstream classrooms where learners with special needs are integrated. Several studies highlight issues related to infrastructure, resources, and classroom support that impede effective inclusive education practices.

Labrague (2018) and De Jesus (2018) conducted studies revealing inadequacies in infrastructure and facilities in both SPED learning centers and mainstream classrooms. These studies found that many classrooms do not meet the accessibility standards required for accommodating learners with special needs. Lack of ramps, assistive



devices, and other necessary facilities creates barriers for students with disabilities, limiting their participation and access to education.

Furthermore, research by Rosales et al. (2022) indicated that teachers often encounter behavioral and cognitive challenges among learners with special needs in mainstream classrooms. These challenges are exacerbated by large class sizes and insufficient classroom support systems. Teachers struggle to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities effectively, leading to difficulties in maintaining an inclusive learning environment.

Labrague (2018) conducted a study highlighting infrastructure challenges in SPED learning centers. The research found that many centers lack basic facilities such as ramps, accessible restrooms, and assistive devices, making it difficult for students with disabilities to navigate the school environment safely and independently.

De Jesus (2018) focused on mainstream classrooms and found similar inadequacies in infrastructure. The study revealed that many classrooms are not designed to accommodate students with special needs, lacking features like wheelchair ramps, adjustable desks, and sensory-friendly environments, which are essential for inclusive education.

Rosales et al. (2022) identified challenges faced by teachers in mainstream classrooms regarding behavioral and cognitive issues among learners with special needs. The study highlighted that teachers often struggle to manage behavioral problems and support the cognitive development of students with disabilities, particularly in classrooms with large student populations and limited support systems (Groenewald, et al., 2024).

Additionally, inadequate teacher training and support exacerbate these challenges. Many teachers lack the necessary skills and resources to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities effectively, leading to gaps in support and inclusion.

The environmental and logistical challenges identified in the review have significant implications for inclusive education in the Philippines. Without accessible infrastructure, adequate resources, and classroom support systems, the goal of creating inclusive learning environments cannot be fully realized (Uy, et al., 2023).

Addressing these challenges requires targeted investments in classroom infrastructure, teacher training, and support systems. Providing accessible facilities, assistive devices, and sensory-friendly environments in schools is essential to ensure that all students can participate fully in education.

Moreover, comprehensive teacher training programs and support initiatives are needed to equip educators with the skills and resources to support diverse learners effectively. This includes training on inclusive teaching practices, behavior management strategies, and individualized support for students with disabilities.

Conclusion

The systematic review provides valuable insights into the state of special education in the Philippines, highlighting various challenges and areas needing improvement. Throughout the review, it became evident that while there are robust legal frameworks and policies supporting special education, implementation remains inconsistent. Laws such as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons and the Enhanced Basic Education Act lay down mandates for inclusive education, but there are gaps in translating these policies into effective practice. The lack of adequate infrastructure, resources, and trained personnel poses significant barriers to the realization of inclusive education goals.

Furthermore, the review identified challenges in teacher training and professional development. Many educators lack specialized training in special education, leading to difficulties in addressing the diverse needs of students with disabilities effectively. There is a clear need for comprehensive training programs to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge required for inclusive teaching practices.

Stakeholder engagement emerged as another critical area needing attention. Parents, communities, local government units, and NGOs play vital roles in supporting learners with special needs, but there is often limited coordination and support. Enhancing stakeholder engagement and collaboration is essential for creating a supportive environment for inclusive education.

Additionally, challenges related to curriculum development and the creation of inclusive learning environments were highlighted. Issues such as inadequate facilities, large class sizes, and insufficient support systems hinder the full participation of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

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