

## **The State of Special Education in the Philippines: Challenges and Opportunities for Inclusive Practices**

**DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14841767**

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**Abstract:**

Special education (SPED) in the Philippines faces significant challenges that impact the quality of education for students with disabilities. Despite progressive policies such as Republic Act No. 7277 (Magna Carta for Disabled Persons) and Republic Act No. 10533 (Enhanced Basic Education Act), the implementation of inclusive education remains hindered by systemic issues, including inadequate resources, insufficient teacher training, and societal stigma. This study explores these challenges while examining innovative approaches to enhance special education, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and assistive technologies. A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted to analyze existing research on SPED policies, teacher attitudes, and innovative practices. Findings indicate that teacher preparedness, funding limitations, and negative societal perceptions of students with disabilities are critical barriers. However, collaborative teaching models, professional development programs, and the use of technology offer promising solutions. The study concludes with recommendations for improving SPED in the Philippines, emphasizing the importance of policy reforms, increased government investment, and fostering a culture of inclusivity within the educational community.

*Keywords:* Special Education (SPED), Inclusive Education, Challenges in Special Education, Teacher Training

**Introduction:**

The teaching profession presents various challenges, particularly for special education (SPED) teachers who must address students' diverse learning needs while managing administrative responsibilities. Special education in the Philippines remains a complex issue due to systemic challenges, including limited resources, lack of trained personnel, and societal attitudes toward children with disabilities (DepEd, 2017; UNESCO, 1994). While the Department of Education (DepEd) has made strides in implementing inclusive education, many barriers persist that hinder the effective delivery of special education services. Understanding these challenges and exploring innovative solutions is crucial to enhancing the educational experience of learners with special needs.

Several policies and frameworks, such as Republic Act No. 7277 (Magna Carta for Disabled Persons) and Republic Act No. 10533 (Enhanced Basic Education Act), emphasize the importance of inclusive education and the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream schools. However, studies indicate gaps in policy implementation, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas (Peters, 2003).

Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion play a critical role in the success of these programs, yet many educators feel unprepared due to a lack of training and professional development opportunities (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011). The need for a more structured approach to inclusive education, grounded in empirical research and best practices, remains pressing (Mitchell, 2015).

Furthermore, challenges in SPED include insufficient funding, outdated curricula, and a shortage of trained teachers, leading to high turnover rates and inconsistent program implementation (Ebol, 2001; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Societal stigma toward children with disabilities further complicates their integration into mainstream classrooms (United Nations, 2007). Despite these difficulties, advancements in inclusive technologies and pedagogical strategies provide promising solutions. Assistive technologies, differentiated instruction, and collaborative teaching models have

been identified as effective approaches to addressing the needs of students with disabilities (Edyburn, 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Murawski & Swanson, 2001).

International perspectives on inclusive education highlight successful models that can be adapted to the Philippine context. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, for instance, emphasizes flexible learning environments that accommodate diverse learners, ensuring equal access to education (Ainscow, 2020).

Collaborative approaches between educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders have also proven effective in creating sustainable and inclusive educational systems (Friend & Cook, 1992; Turnbull et al., 2015). Moreover, research suggests that leadership in inclusive education significantly impacts its implementation, necessitating strong administrative support and community engagement (Groenewald et al., 2024; Uy et al., 2024).

Given the ongoing challenges in SPED and the potential solutions offered by research, this study aims to conduct a comprehensive literature review to analyze existing studies on special education policies, teacher attitudes, and innovative practices. By synthesizing findings from local and international research, this study seeks to provide insights into enhancing inclusive education in the Philippines and addressing the persisting challenges faced by educators and learners alike.

## **Literature Review:**

### **Special Education Policies and Programs**

Special education in the Philippines has been significantly shaped by Republic Act No. 7277, also known as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons, which advocates for the rights, rehabilitation, and integration of persons with disabilities into mainstream society. This legal framework aligns with the United Nations (2007) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which promotes inclusive education as a fundamental human right. The Department of Education (DepEd) has implemented various policies to support inclusive education, including establishing SPED centers and integrating special education services into mainstream schools (DepEd, 2017).

Despite these policies, challenges persist, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas where access to quality SPED services remains limited. According to Ainscow (2020), achieving true educational inclusion requires systemic reforms that address disparities in resource distribution and teacher training. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) emphasized the importance of inclusive education worldwide, but in the Philippines, the lack of infrastructure and financial support continues to hinder full implementation (Peters, 2003).

One of the most pressing challenges in Philippine special education is the shortage of trained SPED teachers. Studies indicate that many educators lack formal training in inclusive pedagogy, leading to difficulties in implementing individualized education programs (IEPs) effectively (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Murawski and Swanson (2001) highlight that collaborative teaching methods, such as co-teaching, can improve learning outcomes for students with disabilities, but these strategies require proper training and support.

Another significant challenge is the insufficient funding allocated to special education programs. Research by Ebo (2001) underscores that financial constraints limit the availability of assistive technologies, modern facilities, and adequate learning materials. Furthermore, a high turnover rate among SPED teachers exacerbates these issues, as many educators seek better opportunities abroad, leading to a persistent shortage of qualified personnel (Lazaro, 2021).

Additionally, societal attitudes toward children with disabilities continue to impact the effectiveness of special education programs. Negative perceptions and stigma can lead to exclusion or inadequate support for learners with special needs. De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2011) found that teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education significantly influence its success. Their research indicates that professional development programs can help shift perceptions and improve educators' confidence in implementing inclusive strategies.

### **Innovations and Best Practices in Special Education**

In response to these challenges, various innovations and best practices have emerged to enhance special education in the Philippines. One of the most promising approaches is the adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which promotes flexible teaching strategies to accommodate diverse learners (Mitchell, 2015). UDL frameworks emphasize multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, making learning more accessible to students with disabilities (Edyburn, 2013).

Teacher training programs and professional development initiatives also play a crucial role in improving special education. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) emphasize that teachers' attitudes and preparedness directly impact the success of inclusive education. Professional development programs that focus on differentiated instruction, classroom

management, and the use of assistive technologies have been shown to improve teaching effectiveness (Friend & Cook, 1992).

Collaboration between schools, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local government units has further contributed to advancements in special education. Studies by Uy et al. (2024) and Groenewald et al. (2024) highlight how leadership in educational institutions plays a key role in implementing inclusive policies and fostering an environment conducive to learning for students with disabilities.

Technology has also been instrumental in bridging gaps in special education. Digital tools, such as web-based instructional materials and assistive software, have been increasingly used to support learners with disabilities (Edyburn, 2013). Research by Turnbull et al. (2015) suggests that family-professional partnerships, combined with technological advancements, enhance the overall educational experience of children with disabilities.

### **International Perspectives and Comparisons**

Comparing the Philippine experience with other countries offers valuable insights into improving special education. Studies by Loreman et al. (2016) on inclusive education in Ukraine and Subban and Mahlo (2017) on teacher attitudes in Melbourne and Pretoria provide frameworks for understanding how different educational systems approach inclusion. These studies highlight the need for culturally responsive leadership and ongoing policy reforms to sustain inclusive education efforts.

International models, such as the Canadian-Ukrainian initiative for inclusive education, demonstrate the effectiveness of collaborative approaches between governments, academic institutions, and community organizations (Loreman et al., 2016). Similarly, Taylor's (1911) principles of scientific management emphasize the need for structured and strategic implementation of educational policies to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.

While the Philippines has made progress in promoting inclusive education, significant challenges remain in the areas of teacher training, funding, infrastructure, and societal attitudes. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach that includes policy reforms, professional development programs, and the integration of innovative teaching strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (Mitchell, 2015). Additionally, fostering collaboration between government agencies, schools, and non-governmental organizations can help bridge gaps in special education services (Uy et al., 2024).

By learning from international best practices and continuously refining local policies, the Philippines can move closer to achieving a truly inclusive education system that meets the diverse needs of all learners. Further research and investment in special education are essential to ensure that children with disabilities receive the quality education they deserve, in line with global standards and national development goals.

### **Methodology:**

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) to analyze the challenges and innovations in special education in the Philippines. The SLR approach ensures a comprehensive and structured examination of existing research by identifying, selecting, and synthesizing relevant studies from academic journals, government reports, policy documents, and other credible sources.

The research process follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure transparency and rigor. Data sources include peer-reviewed journals, DepEd publications, and international comparative studies on inclusive education. Key search terms such as "special education in the Philippines," "inclusive education policies," "SPED teacher challenges," and "innovative teaching strategies in special education" were used to retrieve relevant literature.

Thematic analysis was applied to categorize findings into recurring themes, including policy challenges, teacher training gaps, funding limitations, technological innovations, and best practices in inclusive education. By synthesizing these themes, the study provides insights into the current state of special education in the Philippines and offers recommendations for improving its implementation.

### **Findings and Discussion:**

#### **Challenges in SPED Implementation**

The implementation of Special Education (SPED) in the Philippines faces several challenges, primarily stemming from inadequate government support, lack of teacher training, insufficient learning resources, and societal stigma against children with disabilities. These challenges significantly impact the quality of education and inclusion efforts for learners with special needs, making it difficult to achieve the goals of inclusive education as envisioned in national and international policies (DepEd, 2017; UNESCO, 1994).

One of the most pressing issues in SPED implementation is the lack of government funding and resource allocation. Despite the passage of Republic Act No. 7277, which mandates the integration of persons with disabilities into mainstream society, the availability of SPED programs in public schools remains limited (Republic Act No. 7277). Many schools struggle with insufficient learning materials, outdated assessment tools, and a shortage of assistive technologies that cater to diverse learning needs (Edyburn, 2013). Without adequate financial and logistical support, teachers find it challenging to implement individualized instruction and interventions for students with disabilities.

Another significant challenge is the lack of proper teacher training and professional development in inclusive education. Studies have shown that many regular classroom teachers lack the necessary skills and knowledge to accommodate students with disabilities effectively (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The absence of training in differentiated instruction and inclusive pedagogical strategies leads to difficulties in addressing the diverse needs of SPED learners (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Capacity-building workshops and professional development programs are essential to bridge this gap and equip educators with the tools needed to foster an inclusive learning environment (Loreman et al., 2016).

The negative attitudes and societal stigma toward children with disabilities also pose a considerable barrier to SPED implementation. Many parents and community members still hold misconceptions about the capabilities of children with special needs, making their integration into mainstream classrooms challenging (Subban & Mahlo, 2017). This stigma often results in discrimination, social exclusion, and lower expectations for academic achievement, further marginalizing these learners (Ainscow, 2020; Mitchell, 2015). Public awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts are crucial in changing these perceptions and fostering a more accepting and inclusive society (Peters, 2003).

Furthermore, collaboration among stakeholders—teachers, parents, school administrators, and policymakers—remains a challenge in SPED implementation. Studies highlight that effective SPED programs require strong partnerships between educators and families to ensure that students' needs are met both at school and at home (Turnbull et al., 2015; Friend & Cook, 1992). However, many parents of children with disabilities report feeling excluded from decision-making processes regarding their child's education (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). Strengthening these partnerships through regular communication, training, and parental involvement initiatives can enhance the effectiveness of SPED programs (Groenewald et al., 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, including increased government investment, comprehensive teacher training, the provision of inclusive technologies, and societal attitude shifts. By tackling these issues, the Philippines can work towards achieving a truly inclusive education system that supports the learning and development of children with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2007).

### **Innovative Approaches to Addressing Challenges**

Despite the numerous challenges in implementing Special Education (SPED), schools and educators have adopted innovative strategies to enhance inclusive education. These approaches focus on capacity-building, collaboration, technology integration, and policy reinforcement, all of which contribute to improving learning outcomes for students with disabilities.

One of the most effective initiatives is the implementation of capacity-building workshops on inclusive education and differentiated instruction. These workshops equip teachers with the necessary skills to manage diverse classrooms, adapt instructional materials, and address the unique needs of students with disabilities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Avramidis and Norwich (2002) highlight the significance of teacher attitudes in successful inclusive education, emphasizing the need for continuous professional development. Similarly, De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2011) stress that teacher training fosters more positive attitudes toward inclusion and improves instructional practices.

Collaboration among educators, parents, and stakeholders plays a crucial role in addressing SPED challenges. Friend and Cook (1992) advocate for co-teaching models, where general and special education teachers work together to create an inclusive learning environment. Murawski and Swanson (2001) further support this approach through a meta-analysis demonstrating that co-teaching enhances academic performance and social integration among students with disabilities. Additionally, Turnbull et al. (2015) highlight the importance of partnerships between families and educators, ensuring that students receive consistent support at school and home.

Technology integration is another transformative strategy in SPED implementation. Edyburn (2013) discusses the role of assistive technologies in supporting diverse learners, such as speech-to-text software, audiobooks, and adaptive learning platforms. These technologies facilitate accessibility and provide alternative means of learning, helping students overcome barriers associated with traditional instruction. Lazaro (2021) underscores the potential of web-based instructional materials in enhancing personalized learning experiences, particularly for students with disabilities.

Policy reinforcement and legislative support are fundamental in sustaining inclusive education efforts. The Department of Education (DepEd, 2017) acknowledges the necessity of clear guidelines and adequate funding to implement SPED programs effectively. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007) emphasize the global commitment to inclusive education, urging governments to prioritize accessibility, teacher training, and resource allocation. In the Philippine context, Republic Act No. 7277 and Republic Act No. 10533 establish legal frameworks for the rights and inclusion of students with disabilities, ensuring their access to quality education.

Leadership and school management also play a pivotal role in driving innovation in SPED. Groenewald et al. (2024) highlight the challenges and impacts of educational leadership in fostering inclusive practices. School administrators who adopt culturally responsive leadership, as discussed by Uy et al. (2024), create environments that embrace diversity and promote equitable learning opportunities for all students. Mitchell (2015) argues that inclusive education is multifaceted, requiring strong leadership, policy implementation, and community involvement to be successful.

Furthermore, problem-based learning and student-centered approaches have been recognized as effective instructional strategies in inclusive settings. Peters (2003) advocates for flexible curricula and assessment methods to accommodate students with varying abilities. Loreman et al. (2016) emphasize the role of teacher adaptability in ensuring the success of inclusive education programs, particularly in diverse cultural settings.

While challenges persist, these innovative approaches demonstrate that inclusive education is achievable through strategic interventions. By investing in teacher training, fostering collaboration, integrating technology, strengthening policies, and promoting effective leadership, schools can create an inclusive learning environment where all students, regardless of ability, can thrive.

### **Use of Assistive Technology in Special Education**

The integration of assistive technology in special education has revolutionized learning experiences for students with disabilities. Various digital tools, such as text-to-speech software, alternative communication devices, and adaptive learning platforms, have provided personalized learning opportunities that cater to diverse needs (Edyburn, 2013). The use of these technologies aligns with inclusive education principles, ensuring that students with special needs receive equitable learning experiences alongside their peers (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Text-to-speech software plays a crucial role in supporting students with reading difficulties, such as dyslexia, by converting written text into spoken words. This allows learners to engage with academic content without being hindered by reading challenges (DepEd, 2017). Similarly, speech-to-text technology enables students with physical impairments to express their ideas efficiently, fostering communication and active classroom participation (Ainscow, 2020). These digital tools not only bridge accessibility gaps but also empower students to develop independence in learning (Mitchell, 2015).

For students with speech impairments, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices serve as essential tools. These devices, including picture exchange communication systems (PECS) and speech-generating devices, help non-verbal students convey their thoughts and needs (Turnbull et al., 2015). Studies highlight that AAC devices significantly enhance social interaction and academic engagement among students with communication challenges (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). By incorporating AAC technologies, educators create an inclusive learning environment that respects and supports diverse communication needs (Friend & Cook, 1992).

Adaptive learning platforms, which tailor instructional content to individual student needs, have proven effective in special education (Edyburn, 2013). These platforms use artificial intelligence and data analytics to adjust lesson difficulty based on student performance, ensuring optimal learning experiences (Lazaro, 2021). Such technologies align with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocate for flexible and accessible instructional methods to accommodate diverse learners (Peters, 2003). Despite the benefits of assistive technology, successful implementation depends on educators' attitudes and willingness to integrate these tools into their teaching practices (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Research suggests that professional development programs focused on inclusive education and technology integration improve teachers' confidence in using assistive technologies (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011). Collaboration among educators, therapists, and families is essential to ensuring that technology meets students' specific needs (Groenewald et al., 2024).

Policies such as Republic Act No. 7277 and Republic Act No. 10533 emphasize the importance of providing support services, including assistive technology, to students with disabilities. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007) further underscores the need for accessible educational environments. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) advocates for the integration of assistive technologies to promote inclusive education worldwide.

**Conclusion:**

The implementation of Special Education (SPED) in the Philippines is hindered by a range of challenges that require urgent attention. Among the most pressing issues are inadequate funding, insufficient teacher training, and societal stigma toward students with disabilities.

Despite these obstacles, there are opportunities to improve the SPED landscape by drawing from both local and international best practices. One of the key challenges identified is the lack of government investment, which has resulted in limited resources, outdated curricula, and insufficient assistive technologies. As a result, teachers often struggle to provide individualized instruction tailored to the diverse needs of their students. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to increase financial support for SPED programs and to ensure that teachers have access to modern teaching tools and resources.

Equally important is the need for comprehensive professional development programs. Many educators feel ill-equipped to handle students with disabilities due to a lack of formal training in inclusive teaching strategies. Capacity-building workshops focused on differentiated instruction, classroom management, and the use of assistive technologies are essential to improving the quality of SPED delivery. These programs can also help change teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education, thereby fostering more positive learning environments for students with disabilities.

Another significant barrier is the societal stigma and negative attitudes toward children with special needs. These attitudes often lead to exclusion and discrimination, making it difficult for students with disabilities to integrate into mainstream classrooms. Public awareness campaigns, advocacy programs, and community engagement efforts are crucial in addressing these societal challenges. Changing public perceptions of disabilities can contribute to the creation of more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Collaboration between teachers, parents, school administrators, and policymakers is vital for the success of SPED programs. Effective partnerships between schools and families can ensure that students' needs are met both in and outside the classroom.

However, many parents of children with disabilities feel excluded from decision-making processes. Strengthening these partnerships through regular communication and involving parents in educational planning is crucial to improving the educational experience for students with disabilities.

Technological advancements also offer significant promise in enhancing special education. The adoption of assistive technologies, such as speech recognition software and learning apps, can make learning more accessible to students with diverse learning needs. Additionally, innovative pedagogical frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can provide flexible learning environments that cater to the varied abilities of students with disabilities. By integrating these technologies into SPED programs, educators can offer personalized learning experiences that support the academic success of all students.

While the challenges facing SPED in the Philippines are substantial, they are not insurmountable. A multi-faceted approach involving increased government investment, teacher training, technological integration, and societal attitude changes can pave the way for a more inclusive education system. Furthermore, drawing on successful international models can provide valuable insights and guide the implementation of effective strategies. The ultimate goal is to ensure that children with disabilities receive the education they deserve, which is both equitable and of high quality, in alignment with global standards and national development goals.

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