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THE INCLUSIVE INSTRUCTION LEARNING STAND: PREDOMINANT REALITIES IN PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Heloise S. Barba[1], Josephine B. Baguio[2]
[1]*Student, Graduate School, The Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc., Davao City, Philippines*
[2]*Faculty, Graduate School, The Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc., Davao City, Philippines*

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative study examines the implementation of the Inclusive Education (IE) Program in public elementary schools in Digos City, Philippines, along with the challenges encountered during its implementation. Based on in-depth interviews with school principals and focus group discussions with classroom teachers, the findings suggest that inclusive education supports access to learning, promotes participation, and addresses diverse learner needs through flexible admission procedures, contextualized teaching strategies, and collaborative school practices. Teachers noted improved learner engagement, enhanced sensitivity to student differences, and a stronger sense of shared responsibility in creating inclusive classrooms. However, barriers such as the absence of a concrete IE or SPED curriculum, unclear policy guidelines, lack of trained SPED teachers, insufficient teaching resources, and limited funding were also identified. These challenges point to systemic limitations that hinder the consistent and effective delivery of inclusive education in public schools. The study underscores the need for policy refinement, sustained professional development, and institutional support to strengthen inclusive education practices in the Philippine basic education system.

KEYWORDS: *Inclusive Education, Instructional Support, Learner Diversity, Special Needs*

1. INTRODUCTION
Children with special needs (CSNs) represent a growing population in educational systems around the world. Their increasing numbers highlight the urgent need for instructional programs that are responsive to a wide spectrum of developmental, behavioral, sensory, and physical conditions. In line with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), learners with disabilities are expected to receive appropriate instruction that prepares them for further learning, employment, and independent living (Graham, 2017). CSNs are not a homogenous group; they include learners with physical impairments, developmental delays such as autism and dyslexia, emotional or behavioral disorders like ADHD and bipolar disorder, and sensory impairments including blindness and hearing loss. Some of these learners exhibit multiple conditions simultaneously, requiring instructional adaptations that are personalized and flexible. Despite these challenges, many demonstrate strong potential and excel in specific interest areas when adequately supported (EDI, 2019).

Inclusive instruction (IE) has emerged as a globally endorsed approach to meet the learning needs of all children, including those with special needs. This instructional model advocates for the full participation of all learners, regardless of ability or background, in regular classrooms, supported by appropriate interventions and accommodations (BC, n.d.). However, in many countries, the implementation of inclusive instruction remains at the policy level. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, learners with special instructional needs (LSEN) continue to be placed in separate schools or classrooms despite existing inclusive education frameworks (Adebayo, 2015). In the Philippine context, data from the Department of Education revealed that, as of 2014, only 620 out of 34,000 public elementary schools had established SPED centers or programs, while only 6,000 SPED teachers served over 239,000 CSNs nationwide (Geronimo, 2014). Persistent shortages in facilities, materials, and trained personnel continue to limit access to inclusive education in public schools.

Recent studies in urban centers like Metro Manila and Davao City point to gaps in teacher training and resource provision for inclusive instruction. Quijano (2016) found that many educators lacked specialized training and instructional materials to meet the needs of CSNs in regular classrooms. Similarly, Castro (2011) reported a gradual increase in public awareness and enrollment of CSNs in general education settings, but concerns remain regarding the readiness of instructional systems and teacher competence. In Davao City, only 21 of the 284 public elementary schools were implementing a SPED program as of 2016, catering to just 1,280 enrolled CSNs (DepEd, 2016). While national policies such as Education for All (EFA), the Zero Reject Policy (ZRP), and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative advocate for inclusive instruction, their practical implementation continues to face significant obstacles.

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This study investigates the implementation of inclusive instruction in the context of CSNs in Digos City, Philippines. It aims to understand how existing instructional practices, curriculum provisions, and teacher experiences shape the operation of inclusive education programs in selected public elementary schools. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the procedural practices of the participating schools in operating inclusive instruction?
- What are the views of SPED teachers about inclusive instruction?
- What are the experiences of SPED teachers in the process of implementing inclusive instruction?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine how inclusive instruction is implemented for children with special needs (CSNs) in two public elementary schools in Digos City, Philippines. The multiple-case study approach was selected to explore the experiences, practices, and challenges encountered by school principals and SPED teachers as they operationalize inclusive education within their schools. This design allowed for an in-depth, contextualized understanding of inclusive instruction from multiple perspectives, while also enabling cross-case analysis to compare approaches between the participating institutions.

The research was conducted at two public elementary schools in Digos City identified by the Department of Education as SPED-implementing institutions. One of the schools is a designated SPED Center, while the other functions as a SPED School. Both schools offer instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 6 and cater to learners with diverse physical, developmental, behavioral, and sensory needs. Despite policy frameworks such as the "Education for All" (EFA) and "Zero Reject Policy" (ZRP), limitations in curriculum, resources, and teacher training have posed significant implementation challenges. The schools' existing efforts, coupled with their recognition by the Division Office as inclusive education providers, offered a relevant context for exploring how inclusive instruction is understood, practiced, and sustained in public elementary schools. The researcher, with formal endorsement from the Division Office and support from the SPED Program Supervisor, was granted access and cooperation throughout the data collection process.

Participants in this study included two school principals and twelve SPED teachers from the two schools. The principals participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews, while the SPED teachers engaged in focus group discussions. Purposive sampling was employed, with assistance from the Department of Education Digos City Division, to ensure that participants had direct involvement in inclusive instruction and SPED implementation. The SPED teachers represented a range of teaching experiences and specializations, and all had handled CSNs in regular classrooms. Participant selection followed the recommendations of Polkinghorne (1989) and Creswell (2013), with a focus on ensuring depth of insight over sample size breadth.

Data were collected through researcher-developed interview protocols that were validated by academic mentors and aligned with the study's objectives. The interview questions for principals explored their perspectives on school readiness, procedural practices, and institutional support for inclusive instruction. Focus group discussions with SPED teachers examined their classroom experiences, instructional strategies, and perceived barriers to implementation. Interviews and discussions were conducted in Filipino, Binisaya, or English based on participant preference to ensure clear and comfortable communication. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by observational notes to capture environmental and non-verbal cues. Document review was also conducted using materials obtained from the DepEd Digos City Division, including enrollment data, SPED policy documents, and school-level implementation records.

Ethical approval was secured through formal communication with the Schools Division Superintendent of Digos City, and consent to conduct the study was granted by the participating school principals. Prior to data collection, the study's objectives, methods, and ethical considerations were explained to all participants. Written informed consent was obtained from both school heads and teachers. Participation was voluntary, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality, data protection, and anonymity throughout the research process and final reporting.

Interview and discussion transcripts were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, as cited in Mihas (2023). The process began with repeated reading of transcripts to establish familiarity with the data, followed by initial coding to identify recurring patterns and significant statements. Codes were then organized into broader themes aligned with the study's objectives, including "procedural practices," "teacher experiences," "inclusive barriers," and "perceived support systems." Themes were reviewed, refined, and interpreted in relation to the research questions. Peer validation and audit trail review were conducted to enhance the credibility and reliability of findings. This structured approach provided a flexible yet rigorous framework for interpreting how inclusive instruction is practiced and experienced within public elementary schools in the Digos City context.

3. RESULTS

Perceptions and Experiences of School Stakeholders on Inclusive Education Program Implementation

Four key themes emerged in response to the first research question on how School A implements inclusive education for children with special needs (CSNs): (1) procedural flexibility in student admissions guided by NCLB, (2) adaptive practices in the

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absence of concrete policies and sufficient resources, (3) peer support as a reinforcement mechanism, and (4) strong community linkages to bridge service gaps.

Procedural Flexibility in Student Admissions Guided by NCLB. Participants emphasized that the school's implementation of the inclusive education program follows an open-door policy under the "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) and "No Refusal" directives of the Department of Education. CSNs are admitted regardless of their diagnostic status due to the limited availability and high cost of formal assessments. One school principal shared:

> *"I would say that we require the diagnosis, if for SPED program. But there are still other children who have not gone for assessment yet, but we still accept them… We cannot say that we won't accept them. Why? Because DepEd will not allow any refusal." (P1)*

Adaptive Practices in the Absence of Concrete Policies and Sufficient Resources. Teachers and administrators shared that the lack of a concrete SPED manual or specific policy framework forces them to rely on internal initiatives and informal assessments. In lieu of developmental pediatrician diagnoses, teacher-made checklists and interviews are used to gauge students' readiness and needs. A SPED teacher described:

> *"We use checklist. Yes ma'am, we have a checklist as to the level of performance of the children… then, teacher-made exam and interview." (T1)*

Peer Support as a Reinforcement Mechanism. Teachers noted the helpfulness of peer tutoring systems, wherein regular learners assist CSNs during classes. This not only supports CSNs academically but also cultivates empathy and inclusion among all learners. A teacher shared:

> *"The regular children are already aware about the presence of the children with disabilities because we are a SPED center. They also provide help. Then, we also assign them as tutors." (T2)*

Strong Community Linkages to Bridge Service Gaps. With insufficient resources and a constrained MOOE, the school heavily depends on partnerships with NGOs and civic organizations to provide materials and services such as therapy, assistive devices, and school supplies. One principal noted:

> *"Resources for the Blind for the Visually Impaired, then Tebow Cure for the Cerebral Palsy. They provide PT and operations… Jubilee Foundation designs the wheelchairs, and Behind the Rolling Chairs gives school supplies." (P1)*

Perceived Impact of Inclusive Education Implementation on Stakeholder Engagement and Learner Participation

Four key themes emerged in response to the second research question on the impact of inclusive education: (1) promotes CSN acceptance and engagement, (2) cultivates teacher compassion and professional growth, (3) encourages parental involvement despite barriers, and (4) reveals systemic challenges requiring policy attention.

Promotes CSN Acceptance and Engagement. Stakeholders observed that inclusive practices, when sensitively implemented, foster a supportive environment that encourages CSNs to participate in both academic and extracurricular activities. A school principal emphasized:

> *"Putting these children to regular classes would make them feel also that they are regular students, not special. That is why although we have some children here who are wheelchair-bound, they attend the mainstream classes." (P2)*

Cultivates Teacher Compassion and Professional Growth. Teachers expressed that the demands of inclusive teaching led them to become more empathetic and adaptable. While they face challenges, they also experience fulfillment from the progress of their learners. One teacher reflected:

> *"Handling different types of children may sometimes upset you because of their different behaviors, but if you have the passion and love for them, at the end of the day, you are fulfilled." (T3)*

Encourages Parental Involvement Despite Barriers. Despite the financial and emotional challenges, most parents try to meet the requirements for their children's inclusion. Some are even willing to carry their wheelchair-bound children to upper-floor classrooms due to teacher preference. A teacher shared:

> *"She would go up every day, carrying her son… because she wanted him to stay under my class." (T4)*

Reveals Systemic Challenges Requiring Policy Attention. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized that DepEd's lack of budget, specialists, and training hinders full IE program implementation. There is a strong call for national and local government support. A principal asserted:

> *"This program will never grow and will never run without a budget… we had SPED funds before… but now, no more." (P1)*

4. DISCUSSION

This study revealed that inclusive education (IE) implementation across selected SPED schools in Davao City reflects both a strong commitment to educational equity and a set of persistent systemic challenges. Eight key themes emerged: limited SPED program coverage, flexible but inconsistent admission procedures, absence of clear IE policy, teacher compassion and willingness, peer support systems, active but uneven parental involvement, lack of material and human resources, and the withdrawal of dedicated SPED funding. These findings reflect the layered realities of inclusive instruction in under-resourced public schools. The reliance on the No Child Left Behind (NCLB), No Refusal, and Education for All (EFA) policies—despite the absence of a formal SPED curriculum—highlights the dependence on national

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mandates rather than cohesive school-level planning. Diagnostic requirements from developmental pediatricians were considered essential but often unattainable due to cost and availability, echoing access challenges discussed by Hooge (2010) and national policy gaps highlighted in Muega (2016).

Teachers and administrators utilized informal tools such as checklists and interviews to compensate for unavailable assessments, facilitating enrollment and tentative placement of children with special needs (CSNs). This informal screening allowed CSNs to participate in SPED and mainstream programs while schools awaited official diagnoses, demonstrating procedural flexibility but also revealing inconsistencies in implementation. Teacher willingness played a central role, as many described SPED as a calling requiring empathy, resilience, and adaptability. Peer-tutoring systems emerged as a crucial component, reinforcing inclusive practices and promoting social integration—paralleling Vygotsky's (1978) view on the role of mediated learning in social contexts. Moreover, CSNs were not only included in daily instruction but also in school-wide activities such as Buwan ng Wika and Nutrition Month, further affirming inclusive intent despite operational limitations.

However, several barriers were consistently reported. A significant gap in legal and institutional frameworks left schools to interpret IE practices independently. Without an enacted SPED law or unified policy, schools followed varied approaches depending on the initiative and understanding of school leaders—an issue similarly noted by Hornby and Garry (2015). Teachers cited inadequate training, insufficient manpower, and lack of access to specialists such as OTs, PTs, and speech pathologists. Material constraints, such as the shortage of Braille tools or hearing aids, further hindered classroom delivery. Large class sizes and overlapping workloads compounded stress among educators, diminishing the sustainability of inclusive efforts. These structural concerns align with findings by Queiroga et al. (2024), who emphasized that inclusive goals must be accompanied by institutional capacity and support systems.

These findings point to the urgent need for a cohesive national framework on inclusive education, supplemented by adequate resources, training, and legal structures. While the current study focused on a subset of schools, it offers meaningful insight into the lived experiences of SPED teachers and school leaders navigating policy ambiguity and practical constraints. Future studies may benefit from longitudinal inquiry into CSN outcomes, exploration of technology-enhanced inclusive instruction, and policy impact evaluations. Further, expanding the conversation to include perspectives of parents and regular learners could help contextualize stakeholder collaboration. By strengthening foundational supports and aligning local practice with national policy, inclusive education in the Philippines may evolve toward greater coherence, equity, and effectiveness.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study concluded that the implementation of inclusive education (IE) in selected public schools in Davao City is hindered by the absence of a national legal framework, inconsistent procedural practices, and limited resources. While the commitment of school leaders and teachers is evident, their efforts are constrained by the lack of clear policies, operational guidelines, and formal structures. Without the enactment of the Special Education Act, schools rely heavily on individual interpretation of national mandates such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Education for All (EFA), leading to fragmented and unequal delivery of services to children with special needs (CSNs).

Participants underscored the urgent need for standardized procedures, especially in the areas of CSN admissions, assessment tools, and teacher-made checklists. They also emphasized the importance of finalizing and disseminating the Inclusive Education curriculum and SPED Manual to ensure consistency in practice. The shortage of specialized personnel—including developmental pediatricians, therapists, and support staff—alongside the lack of orientation on tools such as the Multi-Factored Assessment Tool (MFAT), further complicates the implementation process. These gaps prevent schools from meeting the educational needs of CSNs effectively and sustainably.

Additionally, the study highlighted the critical role of structured teacher training, improved facilities, and adaptive instructional strategies. Teachers expressed a strong willingness to apply differentiated instruction to meet diverse learner needs, yet pointed to the absence of capacity-building programs and essential resources. Class size limitations, appropriate learning environments, and the need for adequate funding were consistently cited as essential elements for successful implementation. Moreover, strengthening collaboration among peers, parents, local officials, and the broader community is necessary to build a culture of inclusion.

The findings suggest that without immediate legislative action, sufficient budget allocation, and institutional support, the goals of inclusive education may remain unattainable. To advance equity and access in Philippine public education, it is imperative that the Special Education Act be passed and that a uniform, well-supported, and rights-based approach to IE be adopted nationwide. Only through comprehensive policy reform, professional development, and infrastructure investment can inclusive education be meaningfully realized and sustained.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are offered for consideration:

First, it is imperative that the Philippine government prioritize the immediate passage of the pending Special Education Act. Establishing a comprehensive legal framework will provide schools, administrators, and teachers with a clear policy

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foundation for inclusive education. Such legislation would address the current ambiguity surrounding implementation, reduce inconsistencies in practice, and formalize the state's commitment to upholding the educational rights of children with special needs (CSNs).

Second, the Department of Education (DepEd) should urgently finalize, standardize, and disseminate essential documents such as the Inclusive Education curriculum, the SPED Manual of Operations, and detailed procedural guidelines. These resources must clearly define uniform admission protocols, appropriate use of assessment tools like the Multi-Factored Assessment Tool (MFAT), and the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders. Doing so would establish operational clarity and foster consistency across schools nationwide.

Third, targeted capacity-building initiatives must be institutionalized. These should include comprehensive, continuous, and needs-based training programs for both general and SPED teachers. Such initiatives should focus on inclusive pedagogies, adaptive strategies like differentiated instruction, and early identification of learning needs. Orientation and professional development must also be extended to school leaders to ensure effective instructional leadership within inclusive settings.

Finally, increased investment in human, material, and infrastructural resources is crucial. The national and local governments must ensure the allocation of adequate funding for hiring additional SPED teachers and support staff, including therapists, developmental pediatricians, and psychologists, and for improving classroom facilities. Likewise, schools should intensify collaboration with families, community leaders, and local organizations to strengthen awareness, promote stakeholder participation, and foster a shared commitment to inclusive education.

These recommendations collectively underscore the urgent need for legislative action, institutional support, and stakeholder engagement to ensure that inclusive education is not only implemented but meaningfully sustained across the Philippine education system.

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