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Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies for Learners with Special Needs: Basis for an Enhancement Program

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the implementation of inclusive education policies for learners with special needs in the Schools Division of Isabela, identified implementation challenges, and developed an evidence-based enhancement program. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed, involving 360 respondents from 15 selected public schools across six legislative districts. Data were gathered through validated survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants and analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Findings revealed that 64.72% of respondents had not attended inclusive education-related training. Policy awareness and compliance (M = 3.11) and monitoring and support mechanisms (M = 2.56) were partially implemented, while teacher capacity (M = 2.20) showed limited implementation. Facilities and learning resources received the lowest implementation rating (M = 1.69). Identification and assessment (M = 3.73), facilities and learning resources (M = 3.56), and teacher-related concerns (M = 3.39) emerged as the most challenging areas. Qualitative findings highlighted inadequate specialist access, insufficient instructional resources, limited professional preparation, and inconsistent technical assistance. The study concluded that institutional and resource constraints hinder consistent policy implementation. It recommends implementing Project SIBOL to strengthen assessment procedures, teacher development, accessibility, resource provision, and monitoring. The study was limited to selected public schools in Isabela, excluding private institutions and clinical assessments. Its findings provide a localized empirical foundation for institutional planning and coordinated improvements in inclusive education services.

Keywords: *Educational Accessibility, Inclusive Education, Isabela Schools, Learner Assessment, Policy Implementation, Special Needs Education, Teacher Development*

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a fundamental human right that ensures equitable access to quality education for all learners, regardless of disability, ability, or background. It promotes meaningful participation, social acceptance, and holistic development through accessible learning environments, differentiated instruction, appropriate support services, and collaboration among educational stakeholders. Its effective implementation requires transforming school policies, curricula, instructional practices, facilities, and institutional cultures to address learner diversity and eliminate discrimination (UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti, 2026). Inclusive education is grounded in the principles of equity, accessibility, and learner-centered instruction. UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti (2026) and Sepadi (2025) emphasize the need for educational systems to accommodate learner differences rather than require learners to conform to

standardized approaches. Inclusive environments also support academic achievement, social integration, and positive relationships among learners (Lindner & Schwab, 2025; Rytivaara et al., 2024). In the Philippines, inclusive education is supported by the 1987 Philippine Constitution, Republic Act No. 7277, Republic Act No. 10533, DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009, and DepEd Order No. 21, s. 2019. Republic Act No. 11650 further strengthens the protection of learners with disabilities by institutionalizing inclusive education services and establishing Inclusive Learning Resource Centers. These policies reinforce the government's responsibility to provide accessible, equitable, and responsive educational opportunities. Despite these legal provisions, implementing inclusive education remains challenging, particularly in public schools with limited resources, insufficient specialized personnel, and inadequate institutional support. Research indicates that policy implementation is often inconsistent because of deficiencies in teacher preparedness, assessment procedures, facilities, instructional materials, and monitoring systems (Sepadi, 2025; UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti, 2026). Philippine studies likewise identify persistent disparities between policy requirements and actual classroom practices (Calasang, 2025; Beltran et al., 2023). In the Schools Division of Isabela, these concerns highlight the need to examine how inclusive education policies are implemented and identify the challenges experienced by school heads, special education teachers, regular teachers, guidance coordinators, and parents. Accordingly, this study assessed policy implementation and its associated challenges to provide an empirical basis for developing an Inclusive Education Enhancement Program that strengthens educational access, participation, and support for learners with special needs. The right to inclusive education is also elaborated in General Comment No. 4, which calls for systemic changes to ensure access and participation for persons with disabilities (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016). Inclusive pedagogy emphasizes extending learning opportunities to all pupils rather than treating differences as grounds for exclusion (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Research Problem

Although inclusive education is supported by comprehensive national and international policies, its implementation remains uneven across educational settings. The existence of legal mandates does not necessarily ensure effective instructional delivery, adequate resources, appropriate learner assessment, or sustained institutional support. Previous studies have identified discrepancies between policy awareness and actual implementation, particularly in teacher competence, differentiated instruction, and individualized educational interventions (Beltran et al., 2023). In the Schools Division of Isabela, baseline information indicates that approximately 1% of enrolled learners are officially identified as learners with special educational needs, compared with global estimates of 3–5% of school-aged children with disabilities (World Health Organization, 2011; UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti, 2026). This disparity raises concerns regarding identification, assessment, and access to appropriate educational services. Limited availability of specialists, standardized screening instruments, trained teachers, assistive technologies, and accessible facilities further constrains implementation. Teacher preparedness also presents a significant concern. Studies reveal that educators frequently demonstrate positive attitudes toward inclusive education but lack the specialized competencies and professional support necessary to address diverse learning needs (Calasang, 2025). Inadequate infrastructure, insufficient instructional resources, and inconsistent monitoring further restrict meaningful participation (UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti, 2026; Campado et al., 2023). These challenges are compounded by administrative constraints, limited parental involvement, and social stigma, which affect coordination and the provision of appropriate support services (Gabumpa-Apas, 2025; Raya, 2025). At the institutional

level, insufficient funding, fragmented service delivery, and weak technical assistance contribute to disparities between policy expectations and classroom realities (UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti, 2026; Sepadi, 2025). Despite existing research, localized empirical evidence remains limited regarding the combined effects of these challenges on inclusive education implementation in the Schools Division of Isabela. Therefore, the central research problem concerns the extent to which inclusive education policies are implemented across five domains: policy awareness and compliance, identification and assessment, teacher capacity and learning, facilities and learning resources, and monitoring and support mechanisms. The study also examines implementation challenges within these domains to establish the basis for an appropriate enhancement program. Related Philippine literature also addresses parental challenges and community engagement as dimensions of inclusive education implementation (Clerigo et al., 2024).

Assumptions of the Study

The study is grounded in the premise that effective inclusive education requires more than the existence of policies; it depends on the capacity of educational institutions and stakeholders to translate legal requirements into meaningful classroom practices. Inclusive education assumes that learners with special needs can participate and develop within regular educational settings when appropriate accommodations, differentiated instruction, accessible facilities, and individualized support are provided (UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti, 2026). It further recognizes that teacher competence, confidence, and continuous professional development influence the implementation of inclusive instructional practices. Teachers require adequate knowledge, specialized training, and institutional assistance to respond effectively to diverse learning needs. Limited teacher preparedness and self-efficacy may restrict the effective application of inclusive teaching strategies. The study also assumes that effective implementation depends on sufficient learning resources, reliable identification and assessment procedures, administrative commitment, stakeholder collaboration, and continuous monitoring. Accessible infrastructure and assistive technologies facilitate learner participation, while coordinated support systems help sustain inclusive educational practices (UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti, 2026; Gonzaga et al., 2024; Starks & Reich, 2023). Finally, the study proceeds from the premise that examining stakeholders' assessments of policy implementation and associated challenges can identify priority areas for institutional improvement. These findings provide the basis for developing a context-responsive enhancement program for inclusive education in the Schools Division of Isabela. Studies focused on inclusive classrooms and teacher preparedness provide further context for examining the support needed by educators working with learners with special needs (Pawid-Pachong, 2025; Humilde, 2026).

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to determine the level of implementation of inclusive education policies for learners with special needs in the Schools Division of Isabela and identify the challenges encountered by stakeholders as the basis for developing an Inclusive Education Enhancement Program. Specifically, the study aimed to describe the respondents' profiles in terms of age, sex, area of specialization, inclusive education-related training, and years of experience working with learners with special needs; assess the level of implementation of inclusive education policies in terms of policy awareness and compliance, identification and assessment, teacher capacity and learning, facilities and learning resources, and monitoring and support mechanisms; determine the challenges encountered in policy administration, learner

identification and assessment, teacher-related practices, facilities and learning resources, and monitoring and support systems; and develop an enhancement program based on the findings to strengthen inclusive education policy implementation. The study was conducted in public schools across the six legislative districts of Isabela and involved 360 respondents comprising school heads, special education teachers or focal persons, regular teachers, designated guidance coordinators, and parents of learners with special needs. It was limited to public educational institutions and excluded private schools, clinical diagnoses, and detailed psychological assessments of learners.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, particularly the concept of self-efficacy, and the Social Model of Disability. These perspectives explain how teacher preparedness, institutional conditions, and environmental barriers influence the implementation of inclusive education. The theoretical foundations are complemented by Republic Act No. 11650 and Republic Act No. 7277, which establish the legal responsibilities of educational institutions in protecting the rights of learners with disabilities. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the influence of individuals' beliefs in their capabilities on their performance and behavior. Applied to inclusive education, teacher self-efficacy influences confidence in managing diverse classrooms, adapting instruction, and responding to learners' individual needs. Insufficient training and limited professional support may contribute to difficulties in implementing inclusive practices, even among teachers who demonstrate favorable attitudes toward inclusion. The Social Model of Disability emphasizes that barriers to participation arise not solely from individual impairments but also from inaccessible environments, institutional limitations, and discriminatory practices. This perspective supports the transformation of educational systems through appropriate accommodations, accessible facilities, flexible instruction, and supportive institutional policies. Mitchell (2015) conceptualized inclusive education as a multidimensional approach encompassing vision, placement, curriculum, assessment, teaching, acceptance, access, support, resources, and leadership. The study also draws on inclusive pedagogical principles, particularly differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). These approaches emphasize flexible instructional strategies, multiple forms of learner engagement, and appropriate assessment practices to accommodate diverse educational needs (CAST, 2024). Similarly, Lev Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the importance of social interaction and collaborative learning, supporting the meaningful participation of learners with special needs alongside their peers. From a policy perspective, Republic Act No. 11650 (2022) institutionalizes inclusive education services and the establishment of Inclusive Learning Resource Centers, while Republic Act No. 7277 protects the rights and equal opportunities of persons with disabilities. These legal foundations reinforce the responsibility of schools to provide accessible educational environments, appropriate instructional accommodations, and essential support services. The Philippine inclusive education framework is further supported by the principles of the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007). Conceptually, the study employs the Input–Process–Output (IPO) model. The input consists of respondents' demographic and professional profiles, the assessed level of inclusive education policy implementation, and the challenges encountered across the five identified domains. The process involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data to determine implementation conditions and priority concerns. The output is an Inclusive Education Enhancement Program designed to address identified implementation gaps and strengthen inclusive education practices in the Schools Division of Isabela. Together, these theoretical, legal, and conceptual foundations establish that successful inclusive education requires competent and confident teachers, accessible learning environments, responsive

administrative systems, adequate educational resources, and sustained collaboration among stakeholders.

Sustainable Development Goal and Multidisciplinary Sustainability Relevance

The study primarily aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. By examining the implementation of inclusive education policies, the research addresses barriers affecting the educational access, participation, and learning experiences of learners with special needs. Its emphasis on teacher development, learner assessment, accessible facilities, differentiated instruction, and institutional support directly contributes to improving the inclusiveness and responsiveness of public education. The study also supports SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by examining educational disparities experienced by learners with disabilities. Inclusive education promotes equal opportunities, reduces discriminatory barriers, and strengthens the participation of marginalized learners in mainstream educational settings. Research emphasizes that inclusive classrooms encourage social acceptance, cooperation, and equitable educational participation (Lindner & Schwab, 2025; Rytivaara et al., 2024). Addressing disparities in resources, assessment, and specialized support can therefore contribute to reducing educational exclusion. Furthermore, the research is relevant to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) through its emphasis on policy compliance, administrative accountability, monitoring, and institutional responsiveness. Evaluating the implementation of Republic Act No. 11650 and related educational policies provides evidence that may guide school administrators and education authorities in strengthening governance, resource allocation, and support mechanisms for learners with special needs. The study also contributes to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by recognizing the importance of cooperation among teachers, school administrators, parents, specialists, communities, and education authorities. Effective inclusive education requires coordinated responsibilities, shared resources, continuous communication, and collaborative interventions. Michael Fullan (2016) emphasizes the importance of stakeholder collaboration in sustaining educational improvements, while Thomas Guskey (2002) highlights the role of continuous professional development in strengthening instructional practices. In terms of sustainability, the research contributes principally to educational, social, and institutional sustainability. Educational sustainability is addressed through teacher capacity-building, appropriate learning resources, and continuous improvement of inclusive instructional practices. Social sustainability is supported by promoting equitable participation, reducing discrimination, and strengthening acceptance of learner diversity. Institutional sustainability is reflected in the proposed improvement of policy implementation, administrative coordination, resource management, and monitoring mechanisms. The study also has implications for technological sustainability through its emphasis on accessible assistive technologies and appropriate instructional resources. Such technologies support independent learning, differentiated instruction, and participation among learners with disabilities (Campado et al., 2023; Starks & Reich, 2023). Their effective utilization, however, depends on adequate infrastructure, teacher competence, and continuing institutional support. Overall, the study contributes to the sustainable development agenda by providing a localized empirical basis for strengthening inclusive education in the Schools Division of Isabela. The proposed Inclusive Education Enhancement Program seeks to improve the continuity, accessibility, equity, and institutional effectiveness of educational services for learners with special needs, thereby supporting a more inclusive and sustainable public education system. At the national policy level, inclusive disability registration is another relevant consideration in strengthening access to services for learners with disabilities (UNICEF Philippines, 2024).

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study utilized a mixed-methods approach, specifically an Explanatory Sequential Design, in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed before conducting qualitative follow-up inquiries. The quantitative phase employed a descriptive-survey method to determine the level of implementation of inclusive education policies and the extent of challenges encountered by implementers. A structured questionnaire using a four-point Likert scale assessed policy awareness and compliance, identification and assessment of learners with special needs, teacher capacity and learning, facilities and learning resources, and monitoring and support mechanisms. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with selected stakeholders to explain and contextualize the quantitative findings. Interview questions were developed based on areas requiring further investigation, particularly implementation gaps, instructional practices, available support systems, and challenges experienced by policy implementers. Qualitative responses were analyzed thematically and integrated with the quantitative results to identify convergent findings, complementary insights, and differences. The combined findings served as the basis for formulating the proposed Inclusive Education Enhancement Program.

Research Locale or Study Setting

The study was conducted in selected public elementary and secondary schools within the Schools Division of Isabela, Philippines, covering six legislative districts. The participating schools represented different municipalities and institutional settings to capture variations in inclusive education implementation, available resources, and support services. The first legislative district included Cabagan Science Elementary School, Delfin Albano Central School, and San Miguel Integrated School. The second district comprised San Mariano Central School and San Mariano National High School, while the third district included Alicia East Central School and Rizal Region High School. The fourth district covered Cordon North Central School, Cordon National High School, and Cagasat National High School. The fifth district included Mallig Central School (Main), Quezon Elementary School, and Quezon National High School, while the sixth district comprised Echague East Central School and San Isidro Central School. These schools provided diverse educational contexts for examining the implementation of inclusive education policies, identifying institutional challenges, and developing an enhancement program responsive to the needs of participating public schools.

Participants or Data Sources

The study involved 360 respondents from 15 selected public schools across the six legislative districts of Isabela. The respondents comprised 15 school heads, 30 Special Education (SPED) teachers or inclusive education focal persons, 150 regular teachers, 15 designated guidance coordinators, and 150 parents of learners with special needs. Each participating school contributed 24 respondents representing these stakeholder groups. For the qualitative phase, 15 participants were purposively selected from the six legislative districts based on their direct involvement, experience, and knowledge of inclusive education policy implementation. They represented school heads, inclusive education focal persons, regular teachers, designated guidance coordinators, and parents of learners with special needs. Their selection was guided by the quantitative findings and the need to obtain detailed explanations of implementation practices, challenges, available support mechanisms, and possible improvements. The study was limited to public elementary and secondary schools in the Schools Division of Isabela and excluded private educational institutions. Clinical diagnoses and detailed psychological assessments of learners were likewise beyond its scope.

Research Instruments or Materials

The study utilized two research instruments: a structured survey questionnaire for quantitative data collection and a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide for qualitative inquiry. The survey questionnaire was adapted from Ni Nyoman Padmadewi et al. (2024), entitled Inclusive Education: Survey on Teachers' Perception of Its Implementation, and modified to align with Republic Act No. 11650 and relevant Department of Education policies. It consisted of three parts. The first gathered respondents' demographic and professional profiles, including age, sex, specialization, inclusive education-related training, and years of experience working with learners with special needs. The second assessed the level of implementation of inclusive education policies, while the third examined challenges encountered by implementers. Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale. The semi-structured interview guide contained open-ended questions exploring stakeholders' experiences, instructional strategies, available learning resources, support systems, implementation challenges, and coping mechanisms. Follow-up questions were used to obtain detailed explanations of the quantitative findings. The interview guide underwent content validation by experts in special education, educational research, and school administration. The quantitative questionnaire was subjected to face and content validation by experts from the Isabela State University Graduate School. Their recommendations were incorporated to improve the instruments' clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. The questionnaire was subsequently pilot-tested among teachers with characteristics comparable to the target respondents but who were excluded from the actual study. Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha yielded coefficients of .954 for the level of implementation of inclusive education policies and .948 for the extent of challenges encountered, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection followed a systematic sequence consistent with the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The researcher initially secured approval from the Schools Division Office of Isabela and the school heads of participating schools. Prospective respondents were informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and significance, and their voluntary informed consent was obtained before participation. The validated survey questionnaires were administered to the selected school heads, teachers, inclusive education focal persons, guidance coordinators, and parents of learners with special needs. Respondents received instructions for completing the questionnaires, which assessed policy implementation and associated challenges. Completed instruments were retrieved, checked for completeness, encoded, and organized for statistical analysis. Following quantitative analysis, participants were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews based on their roles, experiences, and relevance to findings requiring further explanation. Interviews were conducted at mutually agreed times in private and convenient settings. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes. The recorded responses were transcribed verbatim, reviewed for accuracy, and organized for thematic analysis. The qualitative findings were subsequently integrated with the quantitative results to explain implementation patterns, identify recurring challenges, and determine priority areas for improvement. This integration provided the empirical foundation for developing the proposed Inclusive Education Enhancement Program. Confidentiality, informed consent, and secure data handling were maintained throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency, percentage, weighted mean, and standard deviation. Frequencies and percentages described respondents' demographic and professional profiles, while weighted means determined the

level of implementation of inclusive education policies and the extent of challenges encountered. Standard deviations measured the variability and consistency of respondents' assessments. Mean and ranking were also identified in the research design as tools for summarizing and prioritizing implementation indicators. A four-point Likert scale was used to interpret policy implementation, with mean ranges of 3.26–4.00 classified as Fully Implemented, 2.51–3.25 as Partially Implemented, 1.76–2.50 as Slightly Implemented, and 1.00–1.75 as Not Implemented. For implementation challenges, mean ranges of 3.26–4.00 were interpreted as Very Challenging, 2.51–3.25 as Challenging, 1.76–2.50 as Least Challenging, and 1.00–1.75 as Not Challenging at all. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to establish familiarity with participants' responses. Significant statements were coded, related codes were categorized, and recurring patterns were organized into themes representing stakeholders' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and recommendations. The resulting themes were examined alongside the quantitative findings to identify similarities, complementary explanations, and differences. Integration and triangulation of both datasets provided a contextualized interpretation of inclusive education policy implementation and informed the development of the proposed enhancement program.

Ethical Consideration

The study observed ethical principles to protect participants' rights, dignity, privacy, and welfare. Before data collection, the researcher obtained the necessary permissions from the Schools Division Superintendent of Isabela and the school heads of participating schools in accordance with institutional research protocols. Participation was voluntary, and respondents received information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, and significance before signing informed consent forms. Participants were informed of their right to decline or withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using codes instead of participants' names and excluding identifying information from research reports. Survey questionnaires, interview recordings, transcripts, and electronic records were securely stored and accessible only to authorized research personnel. All collected information was used exclusively for academic and research purposes, with sensitive records archived or disposed of in accordance with applicable ethical standards and data-protection requirements, including the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and Institutional Research Ethics Board (IREB) guidelines. For qualitative interviews, participants' emotional and psychological well-being was considered, particularly when discussing experiences involving learners with special needs. Interviews were conducted respectfully, and participants could decline to answer questions that caused discomfort. The study adhered to the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence to minimize potential risks and protect participants from harm. The researcher also declared no financial, institutional, personal, or professional conflicts of interest that could compromise the study's objectivity. No external commercial funding or partisan sponsorship was received, and the research was conducted independently to ensure the integrity of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Level of Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies

3.1.1 Demographic and Professional Profile of Respondents

The study involved 360 respondents, predominantly female (67.78%) and aged 50 years and below (86.94%). The largest age group was 31–40 years (41.94%), followed by 41–50 years (25.56%). Respondents represented diverse areas of specialization, including Special Education (8.33%), English (8.06%), Science and Educational Management/General Education (7.22% each), and Mathematics (6.11%). Notably, 64.72% had not attended inclusive education-related

training, although 73.33% had between one and ten years of experience working with learners with special needs. These findings indicate that most respondents possessed relevant practical experience but had limited exposure to formal professional development in inclusive education. The findings emphasize the importance of strengthening teachers' professional preparation and instructional competence. Practical experience alone does not necessarily ensure sufficient knowledge of inclusive education policies, differentiated instruction, or individualized learner support. Donath et al. (2023) found that teacher-training interventions improved educators' attitudes, knowledge, and instructional skills related to inclusion. Similarly, Alcosero et al. (2023) identified professional readiness, psychological preparedness, teaching experience, and collaboration as essential factors in effective inclusive education. These findings support the need for sustained, practical, and context-responsive capacity-building programs for educational personnel in the Schools Division of Isabela. This need for professional development is also relevant to research on differentiated instruction and sustainable teacher empowerment (Liang et al., 2025).

3.1.2 Policy Awareness and Compliance

The implementation of inclusive education policies in terms of policy awareness and compliance was rated Partially Implemented, with an overall mean of 3.11 (SD = 0.41). The designation of inclusive education or SPED focal persons received the highest rating (M = 3.44, SD = 0.51), followed by compliance with legislative provisions (M = 3.28, SD = 0.52), both classified as Fully Implemented. Administrative support (M = 3.17), communication of policies to teachers (M = 2.85), and integration of inclusive education goals into School Improvement Plans (M = 2.81) were Partially Implemented. Qualitative findings confirmed that focal persons disseminated policy information and assisted teachers, although orientations were often insufficient to address practical classroom concerns. These findings suggest that formal administrative structures for inclusive education exist, but their effectiveness depends on consistent policy communication, collaborative planning, and practical implementation. The presence of designated focal persons facilitates coordination but does not guarantee comprehensive teacher preparedness or institutional compliance. UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti (2026) emphasized that inclusive education requires coordinated policy implementation, continuous professional development, and institutional support. Similarly, DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009 highlights the importance of incorporating inclusive education into school planning and strengthening collaboration among educational stakeholders. Thus, the results indicate a need to move beyond administrative compliance toward sustained school-wide implementation.

3.1.3 Identification and Assessment of Learners with Special Needs

The implementation of identification and assessment procedures was described as Slightly Implemented in the dissertation, with a reported overall mean of 2.85 (SD = 0.71). The preparation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) obtained the lowest mean (M = 1.54, SD = 0.59), followed by assessment before placement (M = 1.81, SD = 0.58) and screening procedures (M = 1.97, SD = 0.52). The findings revealed insufficient standardized screening instruments, limited access to qualified specialists, delayed assessments, and inconsistent individualized intervention planning. Qualitative responses further indicated that schools relied heavily on teacher observations and parental involvement because of limited specialized assessment services. These results demonstrate a gap between policy expectations and the actual delivery of learner identification and assessment services. The absence of standardized procedures and

specialized expertise may delay appropriate educational interventions and affect the development of individualized support plans. Republic Act No. 11650 and its implementing rules and regulations emphasize early identification, multidisciplinary assessment, appropriate placement, and individualized educational support. DepEd Order No. 044, s. 2021 likewise provides guidelines for delivering educational programs and services to learners with disabilities. DepEd Order No. 023, s. 2022 establishes the Child Find Policy for learners with disabilities, supporting systematic identification and referral. Strengthening school-based screening, referral systems, specialist collaboration, and IEP preparation is therefore essential to improving implementation.

3.1.4 Teacher Capacity and Professional Development

Teacher capacity and training were rated Slightly Implemented, with an overall mean of 2.20 (SD = 0.37). Differentiated instruction received the highest indicator mean (M = 2.54, SD = 0.57), interpreted as Partially Implemented. However, the findings revealed inadequate specialized training, limited mentoring opportunities, insufficient technical assistance, and inconsistent collaboration between SPED and regular teachers. Qualitative accounts indicated that teachers attempted to modify instructional activities and provide accommodations but often lacked the specialized knowledge and continuing support needed to address diverse learner needs effectively. The findings indicate that teachers demonstrate commitment to inclusive practices despite limitations in professional preparation and institutional assistance. Aribbay et al. (2024) and Forrosuelo (2025) identified inadequate teacher preparation and limited professional support as barriers to effective inclusive education. Donath et al. (2023) reported that professional development improves teachers' inclusive education knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Similarly, Gonzaga et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of professional learning, policy knowledge, and relevant experience in strengthening teacher preparedness. These findings support continuous, practice-oriented training, mentoring, collaborative lesson planning, and instructional coaching. Related studies have examined the experiences of junior high school teachers working with learners with disabilities and the implementation challenges encountered by public elementary teachers (Del Carmen et al., 2026; Jimenez, 2025).

3.1.5 Facilities and Learning Resources

Facilities and learning resources obtained the lowest implementation rating, classified as Not Implemented, with an overall mean of 1.69 (SD = 0.41). Assistive devices received the lowest indicator mean (M = 1.17, SD = 0.42), followed by the availability of resource rooms or SPED corners (M = 1.59, SD = 0.56) and classroom conditions conducive to inclusion (M = 1.66, SD = 0.56). Qualitative findings revealed shortages of specialized instructional materials, accessible facilities, assistive technologies, and appropriate learning spaces. Some teachers developed improvised materials or used personal funds to provide instructional resources, while overcrowded classrooms limited individualized attention and contributed to sensory discomfort among learners. These findings demonstrate that insufficient physical and instructional resources substantially restrict the implementation of inclusive education. Although teachers attempt to compensate through creativity and personal initiative, sustainable inclusion requires adequate institutional funding and accessible educational facilities. Mesias (2026) and Montales (2026) highlighted continuing challenges involving the availability of instructional materials, assistive technologies, and appropriate learning resources for learners with special educational needs in Philippine educational settings. The results reinforce the need for functional resource

rooms, appropriate assistive technologies, accessible classrooms, specialized instructional materials, and sustained resource allocation to support meaningful learner participation.

3.1.6 Monitoring and Support Mechanisms

Monitoring and support mechanisms were rated Partially Implemented, with an overall mean of 2.56 (SD = 0.44). The findings indicated that schools maintained some reporting procedures, stakeholder coordination activities, and communication mechanisms. However, regular supervisory monitoring, technical coaching, systematic feedback, and the utilization of monitoring results for program improvement remained inconsistent. Qualitative responses showed that teachers and school administrators received limited follow-up assistance, particularly in addressing instructional challenges, developing accommodations, and improving individualized learner support. The findings suggest that existing monitoring activities are insufficiently connected to sustained professional assistance and continuous program improvement. Monitoring focused primarily on compliance may not adequately address classroom-level implementation gaps. UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti (2026) emphasized the importance of systematic monitoring, technical assistance, and institutional accountability in strengthening inclusive education. The implementing rules and regulations of Republic Act No. 11650 likewise reinforce the responsibility of educational institutions to provide appropriate services and support mechanisms. The results therefore support regular supervisory visits, classroom-based coaching, responsive feedback systems, and coordinated technical assistance.

3.2 Challenges Encountered in Implementing Inclusive Education Policies

3.2.1 Policy and Administrative Challenges

Policy and administrative challenges obtained an overall mean of 2.94 (SD = 0.36), interpreted as Challenging. Inadequate budget allocation emerged as the most significant concern (M = 3.57, SD = 0.54), followed by weak integration of inclusive education into School Improvement Plans (M = 2.88, SD = 0.51), unclear implementation guidelines (M = 2.75, SD = 0.56), and insufficient administrative support (M = 2.56, SD = 0.57). Qualitative findings revealed that limited Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE) restricted schools' capacity to provide specialized instructional materials, accessible facilities, and learner support services. Teachers and parents consequently reported using personal funds to address educational resource shortages. The findings indicate that insufficient financing, weak institutional planning, and limited administrative assistance hinder the translation of inclusive education policies into effective classroom practices. Gonzaga et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of teacher readiness, professional competence, and institutional support in addressing challenges associated with inclusive education implementation. Similarly, Tagyamon et al. (2025) identified continuing disparities in understanding and implementation capacity among educational stakeholders. EDCOM 2 (2025) also recognized resource and capacity constraints affecting inclusive education implementation. These findings emphasize the need for adequate funding, explicit inclusion of inclusive education priorities in school planning, clear operational guidelines, and sustained administrative support. Teacher-perceived challenges in inclusive education provide a further perspective on institutional and classroom-level implementation constraints (Sanchez & Adajar, 2023).

3.2.2 Identification and Assessment Challenges

Identification and assessment challenges received the highest overall challenge rating, with a mean of 3.73 (SD = 0.31), interpreted as Very Challenging. Limited access to specialists, including developmental pediatricians, psychologists, and therapists, was the most significant concern (M = 3.92, SD = 0.29). Delayed assessment and placement also received a high rating (M = 3.78, SD = 0.44). Qualitative responses revealed that the shortage of qualified specialists, high assessment costs, inadequate standardized screening tools, and limited expertise in preparing Individualized Education Plans delayed appropriate identification, placement, and intervention. Some learners consequently remained in regular classrooms without sufficient individualized accommodations while awaiting formal assessment. The findings indicate that limited access to specialized assessment services represents a major structural barrier to inclusive education. Kadriu et al. (2024) and Shutaleva et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of appropriate educational support in addressing learners' diverse needs. Similarly, Gonzaga et al. (2024) identified teacher readiness and professional competencies as important considerations in implementing inclusive education. Republic Act No. 11650 and its implementing rules and regulations likewise recognize early identification, multidisciplinary assessment, individualized educational planning, and appropriate placement as essential components of inclusive education. Strengthening referral systems, establishing standardized screening procedures, and improving coordination with qualified specialists may therefore address the identified gaps in learner assessment and support.

3.2.3 Teacher-Related Challenges

Teacher-related challenges obtained an overall mean of 3.39 (SD = 0.30), interpreted as Very Challenging. Respondents identified insufficient specialized training, heavy teaching workloads, limited competence in differentiated instruction, inadequate classroom support, and difficulties addressing learners' diverse behavioral and instructional needs. Qualitative findings indicated that regular teachers frequently managed learners with special needs without sufficient SPED assistance or specialized professional preparation. Teachers also reported difficulties preparing individualized instructional materials, managing large classes, and balancing inclusive education responsibilities with regular teaching and administrative tasks. These findings indicate that effective inclusion requires more than teachers' willingness to accommodate learner diversity. UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti (2026) emphasized the importance of adequate teacher preparation, continuing professional development, and institutional support. Similarly, Johnson and Erasmus (2024) identified excessive workloads, insufficient training, resource limitations, and inadequate professional assistance as significant barriers to inclusive classroom implementation. The results support sustained teacher capacity-building, collaborative instructional planning, co-teaching arrangements, mentoring, and classroom-based technical assistance to strengthen instructional competence and reduce implementation difficulties. Research on special needs teachers' policy implementation experiences and challenges in handling learners with special needs provides additional context for these findings (Español et al., 2025; Padreganda et al., 2024).

3.2.4 Facilities and Learning Resources Challenges

Challenges involving facilities and learning resources were rated Very Challenging, with an overall mean of 3.56 (SD = 0.37). Respondents identified inadequate assistive technologies, overcrowded classrooms, inaccessible infrastructure, insufficient specialized instructional

materials, and limited SPED resource rooms as major implementation barriers. Qualitative findings confirmed that teachers frequently improvised instructional materials because of insufficient institutional resources. Participants also reported that overcrowded and noisy classrooms limited individualized instruction and created difficulties for learners requiring quieter or more structured learning environments. These findings demonstrate that inadequate facilities and educational resources restrict accessibility, participation, and the delivery of individualized support. UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti (2026) emphasized that educational exclusion is influenced by environmental and institutional barriers, including insufficient resources and unsuitable learning conditions. The United Nations (2006) likewise recognized accessibility as essential to the participation of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, the World Health Organization and UNICEF (2022) identified continuing disparities in access to assistive technologies and emphasized coordinated financing, service provision, and institutional support. The findings therefore highlight the importance of accessible classrooms, functional resource spaces, specialized instructional materials, assistive devices, and sustainable resource allocation.

3.2.5 Monitoring and Support Mechanism Challenges

Challenges associated with monitoring and support mechanisms obtained an overall mean of 2.52 (SD = 0.37), interpreted as Challenging. Respondents reported inconsistent monitoring activities, limited supervisory visits, insufficient technical assistance, and inadequate follow-up support from educational authorities. Qualitative responses revealed that teachers required more frequent guidance from SPED personnel in adapting instructional activities, preparing appropriate learning materials, and addressing learner-specific concerns. Although communication with parents and coordination among school personnel were evident, sustained classroom-based coaching and systematic monitoring remained insufficient. The findings indicate that monitoring and support mechanisms require stronger connections between administrative supervision and practical instructional assistance. Regular reporting and occasional orientations do not necessarily address teachers' continuing professional needs. The UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti (2026) emphasized the importance of removing institutional and discriminatory barriers to inclusive education, while UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti (2026) highlighted the need for coordinated support and continuing institutional improvement. Strengthening supervisory monitoring, collaborative lesson planning, classroom-based consultation, and responsive technical assistance may improve the consistency and effectiveness of inclusive education implementation.

3.3 Proposed Inclusive Education Enhancement Program

3.3.1 Basis for the Proposed Enhancement Program

The combined quantitative and qualitative findings revealed that inclusive education policies in the Schools Division of Isabela were not consistently translated into effective classroom practices. Policy awareness and compliance and monitoring and support mechanisms were Partially Implemented, while teacher capacity and learning and identification and assessment were described as Slightly Implemented. Facilities and learning resources were Not Implemented. The most significant implementation challenges involved identification and assessment (M = 3.73), facilities and learning resources (M = 3.56), and teacher-related concerns (M = 3.39). These findings established the need for a comprehensive enhancement program addressing institutional capacity, educational resources, learner support, and continuous

professional development. The findings indicate that effective inclusive education requires coordinated interventions addressing instructional, administrative, structural, and institutional barriers. Teacher commitment and policy awareness alone are insufficient when schools lack appropriate assessment services, specialized learning resources, and sustained technical support. The combined evidence therefore supports an integrated enhancement program that strengthens policy implementation, teacher preparedness, accessible learning environments, stakeholder collaboration, and institutional accountability.

3.3.2 Development of Project SIBOL

Based on the identified implementation gaps, the study proposed Project SIBOL (Strengthening Inclusive and Barrier-free Opportunities for Learning) as an enhancement program for inclusive education policy implementation in the Schools Division of Isabela. The program encompasses six priority areas: policy awareness and administrative support; teacher capacity development and instructional assistance; early identification, assessment, referral, and placement; accessible facilities, assistive devices, and learning resources; parent and stakeholder collaboration; and monitoring, evaluation, and technical assistance. It includes professional development activities, collaborative planning, improved assessment procedures, resource mobilization, and systematic implementation monitoring. The proposed program responds directly to the challenges identified in the study by providing a coordinated framework for improving inclusive education practices. Strengthening teacher competencies, developing functional learner support mechanisms, and ensuring appropriate resource allocation may help schools translate policy requirements into meaningful educational services. Collaboration among school heads, SPED and regular teachers, guidance personnel, parents, local government units, and allied professionals is central to implementing and sustaining these improvements.

3.3.3 Expected Outcomes and Sustainability of the Enhancement Program

Project SIBOL is expected to strengthen school personnel's understanding and application of inclusive education policies, improve teachers' competencies in differentiated instruction and individualized learner support, enhance identification and referral procedures, and expand access to appropriate facilities and instructional resources. The program also seeks to improve stakeholder participation, establish systematic monitoring procedures, and integrate inclusive education priorities into School Improvement Plans and Annual Implementation Plans. Continuing professional development, peer mentoring, resource inventories, stakeholder partnerships, and annual program evaluations are identified as mechanisms for sustaining implementation. The proposed sustainability measures emphasize the institutionalization of inclusive education rather than reliance on isolated activities or temporary interventions. Regular monitoring, evidence-based planning, continuing technical assistance, and coordinated resource management are intended to support long-term program improvement. Through sustained leadership commitment and stakeholder collaboration, Project SIBOL provides a framework for strengthening equitable educational access, meaningful participation, and appropriate learning support for learners with special needs in the Schools Division of Isabela.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that the implementation of inclusive education policies for learners with special needs in the Schools Division of Isabela remains uneven across the five assessed domains. Findings from 360 respondents revealed that although most implementers had experience working with learners with special needs, many lacked formal training in inclusive education. Policy awareness and compliance and monitoring and support mechanisms were partially implemented, while identification and assessment, teacher capacity, and facilities and learning resources exhibited substantial deficiencies. Inadequate facilities and instructional resources emerged as the most challenging area, followed by teacher-related difficulties, insufficient assessment services, limited administrative support, and inconsistent monitoring. Qualitative findings further demonstrated that teachers and parents frequently compensated for institutional limitations through personal initiatives and resources. Collectively, these findings highlight the gap between established inclusive education policies and actual school-level implementation, providing an empirical basis for developing a comprehensive Inclusive Education Enhancement Program responsive to the identified needs of participating schools.

The Schools Division of Isabela, in coordination with school heads and relevant stakeholders, should prioritize the development and implementation of an Inclusive Education Enhancement Program addressing the identified implementation gaps. Priority should be given to improving accessible classrooms, resource centers, assistive devices, and specialized instructional materials through coordinated resource allocation and partnerships with local government units and community organizations. The Schools Division Office should strengthen teachers' competencies through sustained training, mentoring, and professional learning activities focused on differentiated instruction, classroom management, assessment, and individualized educational planning. Schools should establish clearer procedures for early identification, screening, referral, and multidisciplinary assessment through collaboration with parents, guidance personnel, and health professionals. School administrators should integrate inclusive education priorities into institutional improvement plans, strengthen policy dissemination, and establish systematic monitoring and technical assistance mechanisms. The proposed enhancement program should subsequently be evaluated using baseline and follow-up assessments and stakeholder feedback to guide improvements and determine its suitability for wider implementation.

The study was limited to selected public elementary and secondary schools across the six legislative districts of Isabela, involving 360 respondents comprising school heads, SPED teachers or focal persons, regular teachers, guidance coordinators, and parents of learners with special needs. Private educational institutions were excluded, and clinical diagnoses and detailed psychological assessments were beyond the study's scope. Consequently, the findings primarily reflect the experiences and assessments of participating stakeholders within the Schools Division of Isabela and should be interpreted within this context. Future studies may examine other school divisions, compare institutions with different resource levels, and further explore learners' and parents' experiences to broaden understanding of inclusive education implementation.

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