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## VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN A RURAL GRADE 4 SETTING IN BONTOC CENTRAL SCHOOL

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### Abstract

*Inclusive education remains a cornerstone of global educational reform, particularly under Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocates equitable and quality education for all. This study explores the lived experiences of learners and teachers in implementing inclusive education in a rural Grade 4 classroom at Bontoc Central School. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study involved ten purposively selected participants, including Grade 4 learners and their class adviser. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and learner outputs. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed to identify emergent patterns. Findings revealed five major themes: (1) Inclusion as Shared Belonging, (2) Pedagogical Adaptations in Resource-Constrained Settings, (3) Emotional Labor and Teacher Commitment, (4) Peer Support and Social Integration, and (5) Structural and Systemic Barriers. Participants highlighted both the transformative potential and persistent challenges of inclusive education, particularly in rural contexts marked by limited resources and training opportunities. The study underscores the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, collaborative practices, and institutional support systems in sustaining inclusive education. Implications are drawn for policy, practice, and future research, particularly in strengthening teacher capacity, community engagement, and localized curriculum design.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusive Education, Rural Schooling, Lived Experiences, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Philippines, SDG 4*

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## **Introduction**

Inclusive education has evolved into a global imperative, emphasizing the right of all learners—regardless of ability, background, or circumstance—to access quality education within mainstream settings. Anchored in Sustainable Development Goal 4, inclusive education promotes equity, participation, and lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). In the Philippine context, policies such as DepEd Order No. 23, s. 2022 reinforce the commitment to identifying and supporting learners with disabilities within inclusive frameworks.

Despite these policy advancements, the translation of inclusive education into classroom practice remains uneven, particularly in rural settings where infrastructural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural challenges persist. Rural schools often grapple with limited instructional materials, inadequate teacher training, and diverse learner needs that require differentiated approaches. These realities raise critical questions about how inclusive education is experienced at the grassroots level.

Bontoc Central School, situated in a geographically and culturally distinct rural area, presents a compelling context for examining inclusive education. The Grade 4 classroom, characterized by heterogeneous learners including those with learning difficulties and varying socio-economic backgrounds serves as a microcosm of inclusive education in practice.

While existing literature often focuses on policy analysis and quantitative outcomes, there is a notable gap in understanding the lived experiences of those directly engaged in inclusive education. This study addresses this gap by foregrounding the voices of learners and teachers, exploring how inclusion is constructed, negotiated, and sustained in everyday classroom interactions.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### ***Inclusive Education in Global and Local Contexts***

Inclusive education has evolved into a transformative global agenda grounded in the principle that diversity is not a deficit but a valuable resource that enriches learning environments. As emphasized by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), inclusion shifts the focus from “fixing” learners to restructuring educational systems to accommodate all forms of diversity. Globally, inclusive education is strongly advocated through policy frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and reinforced by Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for equitable and quality education for all (United Nations, 2015). Contemporary scholarship further underscores that inclusive education is not merely about physical placement but about ensuring meaningful participation, engagement, and achievement for all learners (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2018).

In practice, inclusive education involves the removal of systemic, pedagogical, and attitudinal barriers that hinder learner participation. UNESCO (2020) highlights that effective inclusive systems require not only policy commitments but also teacher preparedness, community involvement, and culturally responsive practices. Studies across diverse contexts reveal that inclusive education enhances academic outcomes, social cohesion, and learner well-being when implemented holistically (Loreman et al., 2014; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013).

In the Philippine context, inclusive education is institutionalized through various legislative and policy frameworks. Notably, DepEd Order No. 23, s. 2022 (Child Find Policy) strengthens the identification and support mechanisms for learners with disabilities, while earlier policies emphasize mainstreaming and equitable access to education. The Department of Education Philippines continues to promote inclusive education as a key reform agenda aligned with national development goals and SDG 4. However, despite strong policy support, studies indicate persistent gaps between policy and practice, particularly in rural and underserved areas where resources and training remain limited (EDCOM II, 2023; Bernardo & Mendoza, 2020). This suggests that while inclusion is institutionally recognized, its implementation is highly contextual and uneven.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives that collectively explain the dynamics of inclusive education in classroom settings.

First, Constructivist Theory, as advanced by Lev Vygotsky (1978), posits that learning is inherently social and occurs through interaction, collaboration, and scaffolding. Within inclusive classrooms, this perspective highlights the importance of peer interaction, teacher facilitation, and the co-construction of knowledge. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is particularly relevant, as it underscores how learners benefit from guidance

provided by more capable peers or teachers, making it a foundational principle for inclusive and collaborative learning environments.

Second, Experiential Learning Theory proposed by David Kolb (1984) emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through concrete experiences, reflection, conceptualization, and application. In inclusive settings, this theory supports the use of learner-centered and activity-based approaches that allow students to engage meaningfully regardless of their abilities. Experiential learning fosters deeper understanding by connecting instruction to real-life contexts, which is particularly relevant in rural classrooms where localized and contextualized learning is essential (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Third, the Inclusive Pedagogy Framework developed by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) challenges traditional differentiation models by advocating for teaching approaches that extend learning opportunities to all students rather than creating separate provisions for some. This framework promotes the idea of “teaching for all,” where diversity is anticipated and planned for within the design of instruction. Recent studies affirm that inclusive pedagogy enhances learner participation and reduces marginalization when teachers adopt flexible, responsive, and collaborative strategies (Florian, 2019; Spratt & Florian, 2015).

Together, these frameworks provide a robust lens for understanding how inclusive education is enacted through social interaction, experiential engagement, and pedagogical inclusivity. They also emphasize that inclusion is not a static condition but a dynamic process shaped by relationships, practices, and contextual realities.

### **Challenges in Rural Inclusive Education**

Despite global and national commitments to inclusive education, its implementation in rural settings remains fraught with challenges. Rural schools often operate within constrained environments characterized by limited infrastructure, inadequate instructional materials, and insufficient access to professional development opportunities. According to OECD (2019), disparities between urban and rural education systems significantly affect the quality and inclusivity of learning experiences, with rural teachers facing greater demands but fewer resources.

Teacher preparedness is a critical concern, as many educators in rural areas report limited training in inclusive pedagogy and special education strategies (Forlin, 2010; Sharma & Sokal, 2016). This lack of preparation often leads to uncertainty and reduced confidence in addressing diverse learner needs. Additionally, large class sizes, multi-grade teaching arrangements, and socio-economic challenges further complicate the implementation of inclusive practices (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

In the Philippine setting, geographical isolation and resource disparities exacerbate these challenges. The Second Congressional Commission on Education (2023) highlights systemic issues such as inadequate funding, lack of localized instructional materials, and insufficient support systems for teachers in remote areas. Moreover, cultural perceptions and limited community awareness about inclusive education may influence attitudes toward learners with disabilities, affecting their participation and acceptance (Reyes & Santos, 2021).

Despite these constraints, studies also reveal that teachers in rural contexts demonstrate resilience and creativity by adapting instructional strategies and utilizing available resources to support inclusion (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020). This underscores the importance of contextualized approaches that recognize both the challenges and the strengths inherent in rural educational settings.

### **Gap in Literature**

While existing literature provides substantial insights into inclusive education policies, pedagogical frameworks, and systemic challenges, there remains a significant gap in research that captures the lived experiences of learners and teachers, particularly in rural Philippine classrooms. Much of the current body of knowledge is dominated by quantitative studies or policy analyses that, while valuable, often fail to illuminate the nuanced, everyday realities of inclusive education as experienced by those directly involved.

Qualitative investigations that foreground participant voices are limited, especially in geographically isolated and culturally distinct contexts such as Bontoc. As noted by Ainscow (2020), understanding inclusion requires attention to local practices, relationships, and meanings that cannot be fully captured through standardized measures alone. Furthermore, there is a lack of context-specific studies that integrate cultural, social, and institutional dimensions

of inclusion within rural Philippine education.

This study addresses these gaps by employing a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of learners and educators in a rural Grade 4 classroom. By doing so, it contributes to the growing body of literature that emphasizes contextually grounded, experience-based understandings of inclusive education. The findings aim to provide insights that are not only theoretically relevant but also practically significant for informing policy, teacher development, and inclusive practices in similar contexts.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and describe the lived experiences of participants engaged in inclusive education within a rural Grade 4 classroom at Bontoc Central School. Phenomenology was deemed appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective meanings, perceptions, and interpretations of inclusion as experienced in their everyday classroom interactions. Anchored in interpretivist paradigms, the design sought to capture the essence of inclusive practices by foregrounding the voices of both learners and educators, thereby providing rich, contextualized insights into how inclusion is constructed and sustained in a rural educational setting.

The study involved ten purposively selected participants who were directly engaged in the inclusive education process. These included eight Grade 4 learners representing diverse learning needs and backgrounds, one class adviser responsible for implementing inclusive instructional practices, and one school head who provided additional perspectives for triangulation. Purposive sampling was utilized to ensure that participants possessed relevant experiences and could provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion of multiple participant groups enabled a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive education from both learner and institutional perspectives.

Data were collected using multiple qualitative methods to ensure triangulation and depth of analysis. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, allowing participants to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to inclusive education in an open and flexible manner. These interviews were guided by an interview protocol aligned with the objectives of the study but allowed for probing and follow-up questions to elicit richer responses. In addition, non-participant classroom observations were conducted to capture real-time interactions, instructional strategies, and classroom dynamics that reflect inclusive practices. Field notes were systematically recorded to document behavioral patterns, peer interactions, and teacher facilitation. Furthermore, document analysis was undertaken to examine instructional materials such as lesson plans, activity sheets, and learner outputs, providing supplementary evidence of how inclusive strategies were planned and implemented. The integration of these methods ensured a holistic and credible representation of the phenomenon.

The collected data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), which provides a systematic and rigorous approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis began with data familiarization, wherein transcripts and field notes were repeatedly read to gain an overall understanding of the dataset. This was followed by the generation of initial codes, where significant statements and meaningful units were identified and labeled. Subsequently, these codes were organized into potential categories and themes that captured recurring patterns across participants' narratives. The themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, distinctiveness, and alignment with the research objectives. Finally, the themes were defined and interpreted, linking them to existing theories and empirical studies to provide deeper analytical insights. This iterative and reflective process ensured that the findings were both grounded in the data and theoretically informed.

To ensure the rigor and credibility of the study, multiple strategies were employed in accordance with established qualitative research standards. Credibility was achieved through member checking, wherein participants were given the opportunity to review and validate the accuracy of the transcribed data and interpretations. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a detailed audit trail that documented all research procedures, decisions, and analytical

processes, allowing for transparency and replicability. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling, enabling the researcher to acknowledge and minimize potential biases while maintaining objectivity in data interpretation. Lastly, transferability was established through thick description, providing detailed contextual information about the research setting, participants, and processes, thereby allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar contexts. Collectively, these measures strengthened the overall trustworthiness and integrity of the study.

## **Results/Findings**

### **Theme 1: Inclusion as Shared Belonging**

Inclusion in the Grade 4 classroom of Bontoc Central School is experienced not merely as the physical integration of learners with diverse needs but as a deeply relational and social process characterized by acceptance, participation, and emotional security. Learners perceive inclusion as a classroom culture where differences are normalized and mutual respect is cultivated. This sense of belonging fosters active engagement, confidence, and collaborative learning, indicating that inclusion is lived as a shared identity rather than an imposed structure.

#### Participant Responses

- *"Hindi kami naiiba, pare-pareho lang kami dito sa klase."*
- *"Kahit may nahihirapan, tinutulungan namin kasi magkklase kami."*
- *"Masaya kasi walang inaasar, lahat tinatanggap."*

These findings affirm that inclusive education is fundamentally anchored in the development of a sense of belonging, which is critical to learner engagement and well-being. According to Mel Ainscow (2020), inclusive classrooms are those that actively remove barriers to participation by fostering a culture of acceptance and collaboration. Similarly, Booth and Ainscow (2011) emphasize that inclusion is achieved when learners feel valued and supported within the learning community.

From a theoretical standpoint, this aligns with Lev Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist perspective, which posits that learning is socially constructed through interaction and shared meaning-making. The learners' narratives suggest that social belonging enhances cognitive engagement, reinforcing findings by Osterman (2000), who identified belongingness as a key determinant of academic motivation. Thus, inclusion as shared belonging extends beyond access it becomes a condition for meaningful learning.

### **Theme 2: Pedagogical Adaptations in Resource-Constrained Settings**

Teachers in the rural context demonstrate remarkable adaptability by modifying instructional strategies to accommodate diverse learners despite limited access to materials, training, and technological resources. These pedagogical adaptations include improvisation of teaching aids, differentiated instruction, contextualized examples, and flexible assessment practices. Such practices reflect a pragmatic approach to inclusion, where teachers maximize available resources to ensure that no learner is left behind.

#### Participant Responses

- *"Ginagamit ko kung ano lang ang meron, minsan improvisation talaga."*
- *"Nag-iiba ako ng paraan ng pagtuturo depende sa bata."*
- *"Kahit kulang sa materials, gumagawa ako ng paraan para maintindihan nila."*

The findings highlight the role of adaptive expertise in inclusive teaching, particularly in under-resourced settings. According to Loreman Tim et al. (2014), effective inclusive educators are those who can flexibly adjust their teaching to meet diverse learner needs, even in challenging environments. This is further supported by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), who advocate for extending teaching strategies to all learners rather than differentiating for a few.

From the lens of Lee Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), these practices demonstrate the integration of content, pedagogy, and learner understanding. Moreover, OECD (2019) reports that rural teachers often rely on

improvisation and contextualization due to systemic limitations, which aligns with the present findings. Thus, pedagogical adaptation in this context is not merely a response to scarcity but a manifestation of teacher agency and innovation, reinforcing the idea that inclusion is achievable even in constrained environments.

### **Theme 3: Emotional Labor and Teacher Commitment**

Inclusive teaching in the rural classroom is characterized by significant emotional investment from teachers, who navigate the complexities of diverse learner needs, behavioral challenges, and limited institutional support. Teachers demonstrate empathy, patience, and resilience, often extending their roles beyond instruction to include counseling, motivation, and individualized support. This emotional labor is both a strength and a challenge, as it sustains inclusive practices while also contributing to teacher fatigue.

#### **Participant Responses**

- *"Minsan mahirap, pero kailangan mo talagang intindihin ang bata."*
- *"Kahit pagod na, iniisip ko pa rin kung paano sila matutulungan."*
- *"Hindi lang pagtuturo, parang pagiging magulang na rin."*

The findings underscore the affective dimension of inclusive pedagogy, where emotional engagement is integral to teaching effectiveness. According to Hargreaves (1998), teaching is an emotional practice that involves deep interpersonal connections and moral commitment. Similarly, Andy Hargreaves highlights that emotional labor is central to sustaining meaningful teacher–student relationships.

This is further supported by Jennings and Greenberg (2009), who argue that teachers' social and emotional competence significantly influences classroom climate and student outcomes. Within inclusive settings, this competence becomes even more critical, as teachers must respond sensitively to diverse needs.

Anchored in Nel Noddings' (2005) Ethics of Care, the teachers' narratives reflect a caring orientation that prioritizes relational engagement and learner well-being. However, the emotional demands also point to the need for institutional support to prevent burnout (OECD, 2019). Thus, emotional labor emerges as both a driving force and a sustainability concern in inclusive education.

### **Theme 4: Peer Support and Social Integration**

Learners actively participate in creating an inclusive environment through peer support, cooperation, and mutual assistance. This social integration fosters a collaborative learning culture where learners help one another understand lessons, complete tasks, and overcome challenges. Peer interactions serve as informal scaffolding mechanisms that enhance both academic and social development.

#### **Participant Responses**

- *"Tinutulungan namin yung nahihirapan."*
- *"Kapag may hindi marunong, tinuturuan namin."*
- *"Mas natututo kami kapag nagtutulungan."*

The prominence of peer support highlights the importance of collaborative learning in inclusive classrooms. According to Johnson and Johnson (2009), cooperative learning structures significantly improve academic achievement and social relationships. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, where learners benefit from guidance provided by more capable peers.

Furthermore, David Johnson emphasizes that positive interdependence and peer interaction are essential for inclusive education. Studies by Gillies (2016) also demonstrate that peer-mediated learning enhances both cognitive and social outcomes in diverse classrooms.

These findings suggest that inclusion is not solely teacher-driven but is co-constructed by learners themselves. Peer support functions as a natural and sustainable mechanism for inclusion, reinforcing both academic learning and

social cohesion.

### **Theme 5: Structural and Systemic Barriers**

Despite the positive practices observed, participants identified significant structural and systemic challenges that hinder the full realization of inclusive education. These include inadequate teacher training, lack of specialized instructional materials, limited institutional support, and insufficient policy implementation at the school level. These barriers create gaps between inclusive education policies and actual classroom practices.

#### **Participant Responses**

- *"Kulang sa training at resources para sa inclusive education."*
- *"Walang sapat na materials para sa mga batang may special needs."*
- *"Minsan hindi sapat ang suporta ng systema."*

The findings reflect persistent systemic inequities that affect inclusive education, particularly in rural settings. According to OECD (2019), disparities in resources and teacher preparation significantly impact the effectiveness of inclusive practices. Similarly, Ainscow (2020) argues that inclusive education requires systemic reform, not just classroom-level interventions.

In the Philippine context, EDCOM II (2023) highlights the need for localized and context-responsive educational support systems, particularly in underserved areas. The lack of training and materials also aligns with findings by Forlin (2010), who emphasizes that teacher preparedness is a critical factor in successful inclusion.

Thus, while teachers and learners demonstrate resilience, the sustainability of inclusive education depends on addressing these systemic barriers. Inclusion, therefore, must be understood as a shared responsibility across policy, institution and practice.

### **Conclusions**

This study reveals that inclusive education in a rural Grade 4 classroom at Bontoc Central School is both a transformative and complex educational endeavor shaped by the interplay of human relationships, pedagogical practices, and systemic conditions. The findings demonstrate that inclusion is not merely a structural or policy-driven initiative but a lived and evolving process grounded in the everyday experiences of learners and teachers. Participants exhibited resilience, collaboration, and a strong sense of commitment in fostering an inclusive learning environment characterized by belonging, peer support, and adaptive teaching practices. However, these positive efforts are continuously challenged by structural and systemic constraints, including limited resources, insufficient training, and gaps in institutional support. Thus, inclusive education in this context emerges as a dynamic and context-dependent process one that is sustained through collective effort yet constrained by broader educational inequities. The study underscores that achieving meaningful inclusion requires not only classroom-level innovations but also systemic alignment across policy, practice, and support mechanisms.

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study carry significant implications for policy, practice, and theory. From a policy perspective, there is a critical need to strengthen support systems for rural schools through increased funding, targeted teacher training, and the provision of inclusive education resources that are responsive to local contexts. Policymakers must ensure that inclusive education policies are not only articulated but also effectively implemented through sustained institutional support and monitoring mechanisms. In terms of practice, the study highlights the importance of promoting culturally responsive and inclusive teaching strategies that recognize and accommodate learner diversity. Teachers should be supported in developing adaptive expertise, enabling them to implement flexible, learner-centered approaches even in resource-constrained environments. At the theoretical level, the study contributes to the expansion of inclusive pedagogy frameworks by situating them within rural and developing contexts, thereby emphasizing the role of contextual realities, social interactions, and teacher agency in shaping inclusive practices. These implications collectively suggest that inclusive education must be approached as an integrated and multi-level reform effort.

## Recommendations

In light of the findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the implementation of inclusive education in similar contexts. First, there is a need to implement continuous and sustained professional development programs focused on inclusive education, equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to address diverse learner needs effectively. Second, the development and utilization of localized instructional materials should be prioritized to ensure that learning resources are culturally relevant, accessible, and responsive to the realities of rural learners. Third, strengthening community and stakeholder engagement is essential in fostering a shared responsibility for inclusion, where parents, local leaders, and educational stakeholders actively support and participate in inclusive initiatives. Finally, there is a need to institutionalize comprehensive support systems for learners with diverse needs, including access to specialized services, instructional accommodations, and monitoring mechanisms that ensure equitable participation and learning outcomes. These recommendations aim to bridge the gap between policy and practice while promoting sustainable and context-responsive inclusive education.

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