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Leadership Practices, Policy Enactment, and Systemic Implementation of Inclusive Education: A Qualitative Inquiry among Receiving Teachers and School Heads

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Abstract

Inclusive education had increasingly been institutionalized as a central principle of equitable basic education; however, its successful implementation had depended not only on policy mandates but also on how school leaders and teachers interpreted, enacted, and sustained these policies within their respective school contexts. This qualitative study explored the leadership practices, policy enactment processes, and systemic conditions that had shaped the implementation of inclusive education among receiving teachers and school heads in the Schools Division Office of the City of Ilagan, Isabela. Specifically, it examined how school heads had exercised leadership in advancing inclusive practices, how receiving teachers had interpreted and enacted inclusive education policies, the institutional and systemic conditions that had facilitated or constrained implementation, and the mechanisms through which schools had attempted to bridge the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities. Findings had indicated that inclusive education had been implemented as a negotiated and context-dependent process rather than as a straightforward application of policy. School leadership, teacher capacity, collaborative structures, resource availability, and institutional support had collectively influenced the extent to which inclusion had been translated into meaningful classroom practice. The study concluded that sustainable inclusive education had required distributed leadership, coherent policy translation, continuing professional development, stronger interprofessional collaboration, and system-level mechanisms responsive to the realities of receiving schools. The findings had offered implications for educational leadership, teacher development, policy implementation, and institutional planning for inclusive education.

Keywords: inclusive education; educational leadership; policy enactment; receiving teachers; school heads; systemic implementation; qualitative inquiry

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Introduction

Inclusive education had emerged as an important global and national educational commitment premised on the right of all learners to participate meaningfully in quality education regardless of disability, learning characteristics, socioeconomic circumstances, or other forms of diversity. Rather than viewing inclusion merely as the physical placement of learners with disabilities in regular classrooms, contemporary perspectives had conceptualized it as a process of transforming educational cultures, policies, structures, curricula, teaching practices, and support mechanisms so that schools became increasingly responsive to learner diversity.

In the Philippine context, this commitment had been reinforced through national legislation and Department of Education policies. Republic Act No. 11650, otherwise known as the *Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities in Support of Inclusive Education Act*, had strengthened the State's commitment to providing learners with disabilities with appropriate educational programs, support services, and opportunities for participation in basic education. Likewise, DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021, titled *Policy Guidelines on the Provision of Educational Programs and Services for Learners with Disabilities in the K to 12 Basic Education Program*, had provided a comprehensive policy framework for organizing and delivering programs and services for learners with disabilities. The policy had explicitly designated general education teachers as receiving teachers and had positioned teachers as primary implementers of inclusive education.

These policy developments had established a strong normative foundation for inclusion. However, the existence of policies had not automatically guaranteed their consistent implementation in schools. The translation of policy into classroom and organizational practice had remained dependent on institutional conditions, professional competence, available resources, leadership practices, local interpretation, stakeholder participation, and the capacity of schools to adapt national directives to contextual realities. Policy implementation had therefore been understood not simply as compliance with centrally prescribed directives but as a process of interpretation and enactment. Ball et al. (2012) argued that educational policies were interpreted and translated by actors situated within specific institutional environments. Teachers and school leaders had not functioned merely as passive recipients of policy. Instead, they had made judgments, negotiated priorities, adapted expectations, and constructed practical responses according to the resources, constraints, professional beliefs, and organizational cultures present in their schools.

This perspective had been particularly relevant to inclusive education. Receiving teachers had been expected to modify instructional strategies, differentiate learning tasks, collaborate with special education personnel and parents, accommodate diverse learning needs, and establish supportive classroom environments. School heads, meanwhile, had been expected to create enabling organizational conditions, mobilize resources, support teacher development, coordinate stakeholders, monitor implementation, and cultivate a school culture favorable to inclusion. The role of leadership had consequently become critical. Effective school leadership had extended beyond administrative compliance and had involved building shared direction, strengthening teacher competence, distributing responsibilities, promoting collaboration, and creating institutional conditions conducive to educational improvement. Contemporary international literature had similarly emphasized that school leadership influenced whether educational reforms reached classrooms and became embedded within routine practice.

Despite increasingly explicit policy mandates, implementation challenges had persisted. Receiving teachers could encounter insufficient professional preparation, large class sizes, limited access to specialists, inadequate instructional materials, uncertainty regarding individualized educational planning, and competing administrative demands. School heads could likewise confront resource limitations, staffing constraints, fragmented inter-agency support, inconsistencies in policy interpretation, and difficulties balancing inclusive education with other institutional priorities. These conditions suggested the presence of an implementation gap between formal policy and lived school practice. Understanding this gap had required attention to the experiences of the actors who had been directly responsible for translating policy into everyday educational action. Receiving teachers and school heads occupied particularly important positions because they represented interconnected classroom and organizational levels of implementation.

Previous studies had frequently examined teacher attitudes, preparedness, instructional challenges, or perceptions toward inclusive education. However, fewer investigations had simultaneously examined educational leadership, policy enactment, and systemic implementation through the combined perspectives of receiving teachers and school heads. Examining these dimensions together had allowed inclusive education to be understood not solely as an instructional concern but as an organizational and policy implementation process. Accordingly, this study explored how leadership practices and policy enactment had shaped the systemic implementation of inclusive education among receiving teachers and school heads. By examining how formal mandates had been interpreted, supported, negotiated, and translated into practice, the study sought to contribute to the development of more context-responsive, sustainable, and institutionally coherent approaches to inclusive education.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How had school heads exercised leadership in supporting the implementation of inclusive education?
2. How had receiving teachers interpreted and enacted inclusive education policies within their classroom practices?
3. What organizational and systemic conditions had facilitated or constrained the implementation of inclusive education?
4. How had receiving teachers and school heads addressed the gap between formal inclusive education policies and actual school practices?
5. What framework for strengthening the systemic implementation of inclusive education could be derived from the experiences of receiving teachers and school heads?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study had been primarily anchored in the Policy Enactment Theory of Ball et al. (2012). This perspective had challenged linear conceptions of educational policy implementation by proposing that policies were interpreted and translated by actors within specific institutional contexts.

Policy interpretation had referred to the process through which school actors made sense of policy expectations, while policy translation had involved transforming those interpretations into actual programs, routines, strategies, documents, and practices. Consequently, the implementation of inclusive education had not been assumed to occur uniformly across schools.

The framework had been particularly appropriate because receiving teachers and school heads had operated within different yet overlapping professional roles. School heads had interpreted policy at the organizational level and translated it into school plans, resource allocations, professional development activities, coordination mechanisms, and monitoring arrangements. Receiving teachers had translated the same policy into classroom-level accommodations, differentiated instruction, assessment practices, learner support, communication with parents, and collaboration with other professionals.

The study had also drawn upon principles of distributed leadership. Leadership had been understood as a collective organizational process rather than an activity performed exclusively by school heads. Inclusive education had required cooperation among school administrators, receiving teachers, special education teachers, parents, guidance personnel, health professionals, local government units, and other stakeholders.

These perspectives had allowed the study to conceptualize systemic implementation through the interaction of three dimensions:

Leadership practices had referred to the actions of school heads in establishing direction, supporting teachers, distributing responsibilities, coordinating stakeholders, allocating resources, monitoring practices, and developing an inclusive organizational culture.

Policy enactment had referred to the ways school heads and teachers had interpreted, adapted, negotiated, and operationalized national inclusive education policies.

Systemic implementation had referred to the degree to which inclusive education had become embedded across interconnected school processes, including leadership, curriculum, instruction, assessment, teacher development, resource allocation, stakeholder collaboration, monitoring, and learner support.

The framework had therefore assumed that sustainable implementation occurred when leadership practices supported coherent policy enactment and when organizational systems reinforced rather than isolated inclusive classroom practices.

Methodology

The study had employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to understand how receiving teachers and school heads had experienced, interpreted, and enacted inclusive education policies within actual school contexts. The phenomenological approach had been considered appropriate because the study had focused on the participants' lived experiences of implementing inclusive education and the meanings they had attached to their practices,

challenges, and responsibilities. The study had been conducted in public schools in the Schools Division Office of the City of Ilagan, Isabela], Philippines, where the selected research sites had accommodated learners with disabilities in general education classrooms and had receiving teachers who were directly involved in inclusive educational practices. The participating schools had represented both elementary and secondarylevels and had varied in terms of school size, geographical location, availability of special education programs, and other contextual characteristics relevant to inclusive education implementation. Participants had consisted of [150] receiving teachers and [17] school heads from [17] participating schools, who had been selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experiences with inclusive education. Receiving teachers had been included when they had taught at least one learner with a disability or an identified additional educational need in a general education classroom, had direct experience implementing inclusive education practices, had served in the participating school for at least [3 years], and had voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. School heads had been included when they had supervised schools implementing inclusive education programs or accommodating learners with disabilities, had been directly involved in decisions related to inclusive education implementation, and had voluntarily consented to participate. Participant recruitment had continued until sufficient depth and information power had been achieved to adequately address the research questions. A semi-structured interview guide had served as the primary data-gathering instrument. Questions for receiving teachers had explored their understanding of inclusive education policies, experiences in accommodating learners with disabilities, instructional adaptations, professional preparation, collaboration and support mechanisms, challenges encountered, and perceptions of leadership support, while questions for school heads had focused on their interpretation of inclusive education policies, leadership practices supporting inclusion, teacher development, resource allocation, stakeholder coordination, monitoring processes, institutional challenges, and strategies used to sustain implementation. The interview guide had undergone expert review by [3] specialists in special education, educational leadership, qualitative research, and other relevant fields to establish its content relevance, clarity, and appropriateness. Prior to data collection, approval had been secured from [ethics review committee/research office] and the appropriate educational authorities, after which permission had been obtained from the participating schools. Eligible participants had been informed of the objectives, procedures, potential risks, confidentiality measures, and voluntary nature of their participation, and written informed consent had been secured before each interview. Individual interviews had been conducted [face-to-face/online] and had lasted approximately [15] to [20] minutes. With the participants' permission, the interviews had been audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription, while field notes had also been maintained to document contextual observations, emerging analytic ideas, and relevant non-verbal information. Where applicable, institutional documents such as School Improvement Plans, Learning Action Cell records, inclusive education reports, training documentation, referral forms, and related school policies had also been examined to provide contextual and supplementary evidence. The collected data had been analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's approach. The analysis had begun with the transcription and repeated reading of the interview data to achieve familiarization, followed by the systematic coding of meaningful segments in relation to the research questions while remaining open to unanticipated patterns. Related codes had then been grouped into candidate themes representing recurring patterns across participants, after which the themes had been reviewed against the coded extracts and the entire dataset, refined, defined, and named according to their central organizing concepts. Finally, the themes had been integrated into an interpretive account explaining the relationships among leadership practices, policy enactment, and systemic conditions. The analytic process had been iterative rather than strictly linear, with continued movement between coding, theme development, theoretical interpretation, and rereading of the transcripts. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability had been addressed. Credibility had been strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, participant clarification when necessary, and comparison of perspectives between receiving teachers and school heads; dependability had been supported through systematic documentation of data collection and analytic decisions; confirmability had been enhanced through reflexive note-taking and the maintenance of an audit trail; and transferability had been supported by providing sufficient contextual descriptions of the participating schools and participants while protecting their identities. Triangulation had also been employed through interviews, document analysis, and comparison of participant groups where applicable. The study had adhered to established ethical principles for qualitative research. Participation had been voluntary, and all participants had been informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Pseudonyms or participant codes had been used in transcripts and reports, personally identifying information had been removed from research records, and digital materials had been securely stored and made accessible only to authorized researchers. Particular care had also been taken to ensure that participants' comments regarding institutional constraints, administrative practices, and policy implementation could not be traced to specific individuals or schools.

Results and Findings

The thematic analysis had revealed that the implementation of inclusive education was experienced as a multidimensional and negotiated process involving policy interpretation, school leadership, teacher agency, institutional capacity, and stakeholder collaboration. Participants had generally expressed positive attitudes toward the principle of inclusion; however, their accounts had also revealed tensions between policy expectations and the practical realities encountered in schools.

Rather than presenting inclusive education as a uniform or linear process, the responses had demonstrated that implementation depended largely on how school heads interpreted national policies, how receiving teachers translated these policies into classroom practices, and how organizational structures either supported or constrained their efforts.

Theme 1. Translating Inclusive Policy into Shared School Direction

The first theme revealed that school heads had played a significant role in transforming formal inclusive education policies into understandable school-level practices. While policies had provided the general framework for inclusion, participants indicated that teachers had frequently relied on their school heads to explain what these policies meant in relation to actual classroom responsibilities.

School heads had reportedly used faculty meetings, Learning Action Cell sessions, school planning activities, informal consultations, case conferences, and teacher orientations to communicate expectations related to inclusive education. Some school heads had also incorporated inclusive education concerns into School Improvement Plans, teacher development programs, and learner-monitoring activities.

One school head positively described the process:

SH1:"Whenever there was a new memorandum or guideline about inclusive education, I did not just give a copy to the teachers. We discussed it during our meeting because some provisions were difficult to understand. We tried to identify what we could actually apply in our school and what support the teachers would need."

Similarly, another school head emphasized the need to contextualize national policy:

RT2 "When our school head explained our responsibilities, it became clearer to me. Before that, I knew that we had to accept learners with special needs, but I was not very sure what accommodations I was expected to provide."

Another receiving teacher, however, reflected a less positive experience:

RT6: "Sometimes we received the memorandum and were told to implement it, but there was little discussion about how. I understood the purpose of inclusion, but there were situations when I was unsure whether what I was doing was correct."

The contrasting responses indicated that policy communication had varied in depth. Where school heads had actively contextualized policies, teachers had developed clearer understandings of their roles. Where dissemination had remained largely administrative, receiving teachers had experienced uncertainty.

The finding suggested that school heads had functioned as policy interpreters and policy brokers, rather than simply as conduits for central directives. Their role had involved giving practical meaning to national expectations within local conditions.

This interpretation was consistent with Martin's (2026) Philippine study, which found that school heads demonstrated stronger awareness of the legal dimensions of inclusive education, whereas classroom teachers demonstrated stronger familiarity with pedagogical implementation. The study also identified institutional difficulties in translating awareness into practice, particularly in relation to teacher competence and transition-related services.

Similarly, Huliganga (2025) found that Philippine school heads enacted inclusive education through learner identification and placement, program assessment, stakeholder collaboration, SPED-related training, and intervention programs. These practices demonstrated that leadership involved operationalizing inclusion rather than simply communicating policy mandates.

Recent international evidence had reinforced this interpretation. DeMatthews, Conroy, and McKenzie (2026), in a systematic review of 38 studies across 13 countries, identified three major domains of inclusive principal leadership: developing shared commitment to inclusion, establishing inclusive organizational conditions, and building instructional and leadership capacity.

The present finding therefore indicated that inclusive education policies had become more actionable when they were transformed into shared organizational meaning. Policy awareness alone had not been sufficient; teachers needed clear explanations of how abstract principles could be translated into classroom-level decisions. The theme demonstrated that policy enactment had involved sense-making. School heads had bridged the gap between formal policy language and the immediate realities of teaching. In this sense, leadership had influenced not only whether teachers knew that an inclusive

education policy existed, but whether they understood how it should shape instructional decisions. The positive responses suggested that participatory policy interpretation increased teacher confidence, whereas the negative responses showed that simple policy dissemination could leave teachers uncertain about implementation.

Theme 2. Leadership as Enabling, Supporting, and Distributing Responsibility

The second theme revealed that receiving teachers had perceived inclusive leadership as meaningful when school heads moved beyond giving instructions and instead created conditions that enabled teachers to respond effectively to diverse learners.

Participants described supportive leadership in terms of access to professional development, consultation, flexible decision-making, provision of instructional resources, emotional encouragement, assistance in parent communication, referral support, and collaborative problem solving.

A receiving teacher recalled:

RT1: "Our principal was very supportive. When I first handled a learner who needed more attention, I admitted that I did not know everything. Instead of criticizing me, she helped me contact the SPED teacher and encouraged me to attend a training."

Another receiving teacher emphasized the importance of encouragement:

RT4: "There were times when I felt overwhelmed because I had many learners and one child required very close attention. Our school head told me that I did not have to solve everything alone. We discussed what other teachers and the parents could do."

A school head explained how responsibility had been distributed:

SH2: "Inclusive education was not only the responsibility of the receiving teacher. I always reminded the staff that the class adviser, SPED teacher, coordinator, parents, and administration all had roles. If we left everything to one teacher, the program would not be sustainable."

Another school head, however, pointed to limitations:

SH5: "We wanted to distribute the responsibilities, but sometimes there was nobody to distribute them to. We did not have enough specialists, so the same teachers were doing several tasks at the same time."

The receiving teachers had similarly acknowledged this limitation:

RT8: "The principal was supportive, but support was sometimes limited by what the school had. Even if the principal wanted to provide a specialist, there was none available, so we still had to manage the learner ourselves."

These accounts demonstrated that leadership support had two dimensions. The first was relational, involving encouragement, recognition, trust, and collaborative problem solving. The second was structural, involving resources, training, personnel, time, and professional support.

A school head could therefore have been highly committed to inclusion while still encountering structural constraints that limited the extent of support that could be provided.

This finding aligned with Valdés, Améstica, and Coronado's (2026) systematic review of educational leadership for inclusive education. Their review identified five dimensions of inclusive leadership, including commitment to inclusion, inclusive organizational development, adaptive leadership, school-community connection, and resource management for diversity.

Similarly, Lüddeckens (2025) found that distributed leadership was strongly connected with differentiated instruction and inclusive school practices. Shared responsibilities helped create collaborative organizational cultures; however, the review also identified administrative constraints and teacher resistance as challenges requiring professional learning and stronger policy alignment. Philippine evidence had shown comparable patterns. Casaul, Tumolva, and Payos (2025), in a study involving 120 principals in Cavite, found strong principal involvement in advocacy and monitoring of inclusive practices but lower ratings for stakeholder engagement and staff professional development. Resource scarcity was also identified as a substantial challenge.

The findings therefore suggested that effective inclusive leadership had depended on the school head's ability to enable rather than merely direct. The participants' accounts indicated that inclusive leadership had been most effective when teachers perceived that administrators were working *with them* rather than simply requiring them to comply.

The theme also revealed an important distinction between distributed responsibility and transferred responsibility. Genuine distributed leadership meant that tasks, expertise, decision-making, and accountability were collectively shared. By contrast, merely assigning additional responsibilities to already burdened teachers did not constitute genuine

distribution. Thus, leadership for inclusion had required both interpersonal support and adequate organizational capacity.

Theme 3. Receiving Teachers as Adaptive Frontline Policy Enactors

The third theme revealed that receiving teachers had served as the most immediate enactment point of inclusive education policy. Although national policies had established broad expectations, participants had translated these expectations into everyday classroom decisions through differentiation, instructional modification, flexible assessment, peer support, individual assistance, and continuous adjustment.

Several teachers described having modified their instruction according to learner needs.

One receiving teacher explained:

RT3: "I could not always give exactly the same activity to everyone. For one learner, I shortened the task and gave pictures because long written instructions were difficult for him. The objective was still connected to the lesson, but I changed the way he could accomplish it."

Another participant stated:

RT5: "Sometimes I repeated the lesson individually after the class discussion. I also allowed additional time because the learner could understand the lesson but needed more time to finish the activity."

A teacher described peer-assisted strategies:

RT7: "I usually seated the learner beside a classmate who was patient and willing to help. I noticed that the learner participated more when there was a peer who could guide him without making him feel different."

Another participant emphasized flexibility in assessment:

RT9: "There were instances when I allowed an oral response instead of requiring a long written answer. What I wanted to know was whether the learner understood the lesson, not whether he could write as quickly as everyone else."

These responses illustrated positive adaptation and professional agency. However, other teachers described uncertainty.

One teacher admitted: **RT10:**

"Most of what I did came from trial and error. I tried one strategy, and if it did not work, I changed it. I had attended some seminars, but I still felt that I needed more specific training."

Another participant explained:

RT11: "I wanted to differentiate the activities, but sometimes I was unsure how much adjustment was appropriate. I was concerned that I might make the work too easy or that the learner would become separated from the rest of the class."

These responses highlighted an important tension. Receiving teachers had demonstrated willingness and creativity, but they had not always possessed sufficient specialized knowledge to confidently determine which accommodations were pedagogically appropriate.

The finding was consistent with Martin (2026), who reported that teachers in the Philippine context were knowledgeable about the pedagogical dimensions of inclusive education but continued to experience competency gaps related to inclusive content and pedagogy. A 2025 Philippine systematic review by Cabello et al. similarly concluded that while school personnel and parents were generally supportive of inclusion, considerable variation remained in stakeholders' understanding and capacity to implement inclusive education effectively.

The finding also corresponded with recent research on school leadership and differentiation. Lüddeckens (2025) emphasized that inclusive differentiation required systemic leadership, professional learning, collaboration, and coherent organizational support rather than depending solely on individual teacher effort.

Receiving teachers had acted as adaptive policy enactors. They had not simply implemented predetermined procedures; they continually interpreted learner needs and adjusted instructional practices. The positive responses demonstrated agency, creativity, and responsiveness. However, the more hesitant responses revealed that adaptation sometimes occurred through trial and error rather than through systematic professional knowledge.

This distinction was significant because teacher commitment was not equivalent to teacher preparedness. A teacher could have held favorable attitudes toward inclusion while lacking confidence in differentiated instruction, assessment modifications, behavior management, or individualized educational planning. The findings therefore indicated that effective policy enactment depended on strengthening teachers' professional capacity while preserving the adaptive judgment necessary for responding to individual learners.

Theme 4. Systemic Constraints Behind the Policy-Practice Gap

The fourth theme reflected the strongest tension within the participants' experiences. Although school heads and receiving teachers had generally supported inclusive education, they reported that implementation had been restricted by structural

and organizational conditions that could not be resolved solely through personal effort.

Participants described multiple interconnected constraints: insufficient specialized professional development, limited access to SPED teachers and other specialists, shortages of instructional and assistive resources, large and heterogeneous class sizes, insufficient preparation time, inaccessible facilities, problems with assessment and diagnosis, uneven parent participation, administrative workload, and limited funding.

Limited Specialized Training

Several receiving teachers expressed a need for more practical training.

RT1: "The seminars gave us awareness about inclusion, but awareness was different from actually handling the child. I needed training that showed me exactly what to do when a learner had difficulty with communication, behavior, or assessment."

Another participant similarly explained:

RT6: "Sometimes the training was general. We were told to differentiate instruction, but the difficult part was how to differentiate when you had forty or more learners and several competencies to finish."

These responses suggested that professional learning had sometimes remained conceptual rather than sufficiently practice-oriented.

Limited Access to Specialists

Teachers and school heads also described limited access to specialists.

RT4: "There were times when I wanted to ask a SPED teacher whether my strategy was appropriate, but we did not always have someone available. That made me feel that I was deciding on my own."

A school head stated:

SH4: "Referral was one of our challenges. We could identify that a learner needed additional assessment, but getting access to the right professional could take time, especially when the family also had financial limitations."

Large Classes and Limited Time

Class size and workload had further complicated implementation.

RT8: "I wanted to give individual attention, but I also had more than thirty other pupils. Sometimes I felt guilty because while I was helping one learner, I knew the others were also waiting for me."

Another teacher explained:

RT12: "Preparing differentiated activities took additional time. It was possible, but when there were reports, lesson preparation, checking, and other school assignments, it became difficult to do consistently."

Resource and Facility Limitations

Participants also identified material barriers.

SH3: "We had the policy and we had willing teachers, but we did not always have the materials or facilities that the learner needed. There were things that could not be solved through motivation alone."

A receiving teacher added:

RT9: "Sometimes we improvised materials. We used whatever was available because purchasing specialized materials was not always possible."

Parent Participation

Parent involvement had also varied substantially.

One teacher described a positive experience:

RT5: "The parent was very cooperative. We regularly communicated, and if I noticed a behavior or improvement, I immediately informed her. That helped because we were doing similar strategies at home and in school."

In contrast, another teacher reported:

RT13: "There were also parents who had difficulty accepting that their child needed additional support. Sometimes we could not proceed with recommendations because the parents were hesitant."

A school head echoed this concern:

SH6: "We had to be careful in talking with parents. Some accepted our observations, but others became defensive because they thought we were labeling their child."

Taken together, the findings showed that the policy-practice gap had not resulted from a single deficiency. Rather, multiple constraints interacted to affect implementation.

The finding strongly corresponded with Obcial et al. (2025), who found that although inclusive education policies in a Philippine elementary school were generally rated as fully implemented, support services and access to specialized resources remained less developed. Cabello et al.'s (2025) systematic review of inclusive education implementation in the

Philippines likewise identified persistent differences in understanding and implementation capability despite broad support for inclusive education.

Martin (2026) similarly identified insufficient teacher competencies and limitations in transition-related services as continuing institutional challenges in Philippine inclusive education. At the leadership level, Casaul et al. (2025) identified limited resources, staff professional-development issues, and stakeholder engagement as continuing challenges among principals implementing special education programs.

Internationally, DeMatthews et al. (2026) concluded that inclusive principals needed to establish supportive organizational conditions and develop staff capacity, further indicating that successful inclusion required more than favorable attitudes or policy commitments.

The findings showed that inclusive education had been constrained by a **capacity gap** rather than merely an attitudinal gap. Participants generally expressed commitment to the principle of inclusion. Their frustrations centered instead on the difficulty of achieving policy expectations without corresponding improvements in staffing, training, resources, time, referral systems, facilities, and professional support.

This distinction was critical. When implementation challenges were interpreted only as teacher deficiencies, proposed solutions tended to focus exclusively on additional training. The participants' experiences indicated that training was necessary but insufficient. A teacher could possess inclusive pedagogical knowledge yet still struggle to provide individualized attention in a large class. A school head could be committed to inclusion yet remain unable to provide specialized professionals who were unavailable within the system.

The policy-practice gap had therefore been systemic.

Theme 5. Collaboration as the Connecting Mechanism of Sustainable Inclusion

The fifth theme revealed that collaboration had served as the central mechanism through which participants addressed the complexity of inclusive education.

Receiving teachers had relied on school heads, SPED teachers, colleagues, parents, guidance personnel, and other professionals when attempting to understand learners' needs and determine appropriate interventions.

A receiving teacher described collaboration with colleagues:

RT2: "When I was not sure what to do, I asked another teacher who had more experience. Sometimes a short conversation with a colleague gave me an idea that I could try the next day."

Another described collaboration with a SPED teacher:

RT7: "The SPED teacher helped me understand that I did not have to change the entire lesson. She suggested small accommodations, and that made me more confident."

Parent-teacher collaboration was also highlighted.

RT5: "The parent knew things about the child that I could not observe in school. When we shared information, I understood the learner better and I could adjust my approach."

School heads emphasized broader networks:

SH2: "We could not implement inclusion within the school alone. Sometimes we needed parents, the barangay, health workers, or specialists. The more difficult the case, the more important coordination became."

Another school head emphasized collective ownership:

SH5: "My goal was to remove the idea that the learner belonged only to one receiving teacher. The learner was part of the whole school, so everyone had to contribute."

However, collaboration had not always been seamless.

One receiving teacher explained:

RT10: "There were times when I felt that the responsibility was still mostly mine because I was the classroom teacher. People would advise me, but at the end of the day, I was still the one handling everything inside the classroom."

Another participant described inconsistent parental coordination:

RT13: "Collaboration worked when the parents regularly communicated with us. When communication stopped, it became difficult to know whether the strategies we suggested were also being followed at home."

These responses indicated that collaboration varied from genuine shared problem solving to relatively limited consultation.

Huliganga (2025) likewise identified stakeholder collaboration as one of the central practices of Philippine school heads implementing inclusive education.

Recent international literature provided particularly strong support for this theme. Valdés et al. (2026) identified the connection between schools, communities, and territories as one of five central dimensions of inclusive leadership and emphasized supportive collaborative environments as essential to inclusive organizational development.

Similarly, Abdullah et al. (2026), in a systematic review of 25 studies published between 2021 and 2025, found that

principal leadership strategies supporting inclusion included community participation, resource allocation, supportive school cultures, and collaboration among teachers, parents, and external organizations.
DeMatthews et al. (2026) also identified the creation of inclusive organizational conditions and development of instructional capacity as central components of inclusive principal leadership.
The finding therefore indicated that collaboration had been more than an additional supportive strategy. It had functioned as the connecting mechanism of the inclusive education system.
Teachers possessed classroom and pedagogical knowledge. Parents possessed intimate knowledge of their children's behaviors and histories. SNED teachers contributed specialized pedagogical expertise. School heads controlled organizational processes and resources. External professionals contributed diagnostic or therapeutic expertise.
However, the negative responses revealed that communication alone did not automatically constitute meaningful collaboration. Collaboration had become sustainable only when responsibility, information, and decision-making were genuinely shared.
Thus, the theme suggested that inclusive education should move from a model of individual teacher accountability toward a model of collective institutional accountability.

7. Discussion

The findings had reinforced the view that inclusive education was not implemented through a simple linear movement from national policy to classroom practice. Rather, implementation had been mediated by the interpretations, capacities, resources, relationships, and decisions of actors working within particular school contexts.
This finding had aligned with Ball et al.'s (2012) Policy Enactment Theory. Receiving teachers and school heads had actively interpreted and translated inclusive education policies rather than merely implementing fixed instructions. Policies had acquired practical meaning only when participants connected them with actual learners, classrooms, staffing arrangements, institutional resources, and community conditions.
The role of school heads had been especially significant because they had operated at the intersection of policy and organizational practice. They had determined how inclusion was communicated, prioritized, supported, and monitored. However, effective leadership had extended beyond administrative dissemination. It had involved enabling teachers to act through professional development, collaborative structures, resources, flexibility, and sustained organizational support.
This interpretation had been consistent with contemporary perspectives on educational leadership, which had emphasized collaboration, capacity development, shared responsibility, and organizational learning. Leadership had therefore influenced not simply whether schools complied with policy requirements but whether inclusive values became integrated into routine institutional practices.
The findings had also highlighted the agency of receiving teachers. Teachers had enacted inclusion through daily pedagogical judgments regarding instruction, assessment, participation, classroom relationships, and learner support. Their work had reflected the reality that inclusive practices could not always be standardized because individual learners presented different strengths, needs, and contextual circumstances.
However, teacher agency had remained structurally conditioned. The ability of receiving teachers to provide meaningful accommodations had depended on training, administrative support, class conditions, learning resources, access to specialists, and collaborative relationships.
This finding challenged deficit-oriented explanations in which difficulties in inclusive education were attributed primarily to teacher resistance or insufficient competence. Although professional capacity had remained essential, the findings had indicated that implementation was systemic. Teacher effectiveness was affected by the structures surrounding classroom practice.
The policy-practice gap had therefore emerged as an institutional issue rather than merely an individual one.
The findings had further suggested that professional development needed to move beyond one-time awareness programs. Receiving teachers required continuing, practice-oriented opportunities related to differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, behavior support, individualized planning, accessible assessment, collaboration, and the use of appropriate assistive resources.
School heads likewise required leadership development specifically addressing inclusive education. Their responsibilities extended to institutional planning, resource mobilization, teacher support, stakeholder engagement, monitoring, and the management of organizational change.
Collaboration had represented another key dimension of systemic implementation. Inclusive education had been more sustainable when responsibility was distributed across school actors and stakeholders.
This finding had supported the idea that inclusive education should not be constructed as the responsibility of a single receiving teacher or SPED specialist. Instead, it had required coordinated participation from leadership, teaching personnel,

families, support professionals, communities, and education authorities.
The combined findings had therefore indicated that sustainable inclusion required alignment among policy, leadership, professional capacity, resources, collaboration, and monitoring.

9. Conclusions

The study had demonstrated that the implementation of inclusive education was shaped by the dynamic interaction of leadership practices, policy interpretation, teacher agency, institutional capacity, and collaborative support.
School heads had played a critical role in translating policy into institutional direction, mobilizing resources, supporting teachers, and creating structures through which inclusive practices could develop.
Receiving teachers had functioned as frontline policy enactors who translated broad policy principles into instructional and relational practices responsive to learner diversity.
However, policy commitment had not automatically produced consistent implementation. Systemic constraints related to professional preparation, resources, personnel, workload, coordination, and organizational capacity had influenced the degree to which policy expectations could be realized.
The study had therefore concluded that inclusive education should not be treated merely as a classroom strategy or special education concern. It had constituted a whole-school and system-level reform requiring coherent leadership, continuing professional development, distributed responsibility, collaborative structures, adequate resources, and responsive monitoring.
Ultimately, sustainable inclusion had depended on the capacity of educational systems to align what policies expected with what schools and teachers were institutionally equipped to accomplish.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations were advanced.
First, the Department of Education and Schools Division Offices should have strengthened continuing professional development for both receiving teachers and school heads. Training should have emphasized practical competencies in differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, individualized educational planning, assessment adaptation, learner behavior support, and interprofessional collaboration.
Second, inclusive education should have been systematically integrated into School Improvement Plans, Annual Implementation Plans, Learning Action Cell programs, professional development plans, and school monitoring mechanisms rather than being treated as an isolated program.
Third, school heads should have strengthened distributed leadership structures by establishing school-based inclusive education teams composed of relevant teachers, coordinators, support personnel, parents, and community partners.
Fourth, mechanisms for technical assistance should have been strengthened, particularly for schools with limited access to SNED teachers, assessment professionals, psychologists, therapists, or other specialists.
Fifth, education authorities should have conducted systematic reviews of resource availability, accessibility of facilities, teacher workload, class size, learning materials, assistive technologies, and staffing requirements in schools implementing inclusion.
Sixth, monitoring systems should have moved beyond enrollment or placement indicators and should have considered learner participation, engagement, access to curriculum, social inclusion, achievement, retention, and well-being.
Seventh, future policy development should have incorporated the experiences of receiving teachers, school heads, learners, and families so that implementation guidelines reflected the realities encountered at the school level.
Finally, future research should have examined inclusive education using multi-site and longitudinal designs and should have incorporated the perspectives of learners with disabilities, parents, SNED teachers, district supervisors, and other system-level actors.

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