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# Understanding the Challenges of Inclusive Education Implementation in Rural Areas Schools: Insights from SPED Professionals

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**Abstract:** Inclusive education is essential for ensuring equitable learning opportunities and meaningful participation for learners with disabilities. This study provides a comprehensive examination of the lived experiences of special education (SPED) professionals in implementing inclusive education in rural public schools. Employing a qualitative phenomenological research design, ten SPED professionals were meticulously selected through criterion-based purposive sampling. Data were meticulously gathered through semi-structured interviews and rigorously analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method. The findings highlight four critical areas: lived experiences, implementation challenges, coping strategies, and recommendations. Participants strongly advocated for learner-centred instruction, curriculum adaptation, collaboration, professional resilience, and community engagement. Despite these efforts, they faced significant challenges, including limited instructional resources, inadequate assistive technologies, insufficient professional training, weak institutional support, and negative community attitudes. To overcome these obstacles, participants adopted adaptive teaching strategies, created improvised instructional materials, engaged in professional learning activities, and fortified partnerships with parents and other teachers. Based on these insights, the Rural Inclusive Education Sustainability and Empowerment (RIESE) Framework was proposed, encompassing four dimensions: systemic and policy responsiveness, institutional capacity building, professional empowerment, and home-school-community linkages. This framework serves as a strategic guide for enhancing institutional support, teacher development, resource allocation, and stakeholder collaboration. Its future implementation and evaluation hold the potential to significantly improve inclusive education practices and foster sustainable learning environments in rural schools.

**Keywords:** inclusive education; SPED professionals; rural schools; implementation challenges; RIESE Framework

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is an important approach to ensuring that all learners, including those with disabilities, have equal opportunities to access quality education. The Salamanca Statement emphasizes that schools should accommodate learners with diverse educational needs (UNESCO, 1994). Similarly, Ainscow (2020) highlighted the importance of removing barriers that prevent learners from participating in educational activities. However, implementing inclusive education remains challenging, particularly in schools with limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and inadequate support services (UNESCO, 2020).

In the Philippines, the government has strengthened inclusive education through several laws and educational policies. Republic Act No. 7277 promotes the rights of persons with disabilities, while Republic Act No. 10533 supports learner-centered basic education. Furthermore, Republic Act No. 11650 provides for inclusive education services and the establishment of inclusive learning resource centers (Republic of the Philippines, 2022). Despite these initiatives, schools continue to experience challenges related to instructional resources, teacher preparedness, and institutional support. These concerns highlight the need to strengthen the implementation of inclusive education, especially in rural communities.

In Surigao del Sur, particularly in the Tago District, implementing inclusive education presents additional challenges for special education (SPED) professionals. Rural schools may have limited access to specialized instructional materials, assistive technologies, professional training, and support services. SPED professionals must

also collaborate with general education teachers, school administrators, and parents to address learners' diverse needs. Studies have emphasized the importance of teacher collaboration and professional development in improving inclusive educational practices (Berry, 2021; Holmqvist & Lelinge, 2021).

Although previous studies have examined inclusive education policies, teacher preparedness, and implementation challenges, there remains a need to understand the lived experiences of SPED professionals working in rural schools in the Philippines. In particular, limited attention has been given to how SPED professionals in the Tago District experience educational challenges, develop coping strategies, and sustain inclusive practices despite limited resources. Understanding these experiences may help identify appropriate interventions and strengthen the implementation of inclusive education.

Therefore, this study aimed to explore the lived experiences of SPED professionals in implementing inclusive education in rural public schools in the Tago District, Surigao del Sur. Specifically, it sought to identify the challenges encountered, examine the coping strategies employed, and determine recommendations for improving inclusive education. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study also provided a basis for developing the Rural Inclusive Education Sustainability and Empowerment (RIESE) Framework to support sustainable inclusive education practices in rural schools.

## *STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM*

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of special education (SPED) professionals in implementing inclusive education in rural public schools in the Tago District, Surigao del Sur. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do SPED professionals describe their experiences in implementing inclusive education in rural public schools?
2. What challenges do SPED professionals encounter in implementing inclusive education in terms of:
    - Instructional resources and assistive technologies
    - professional training, and teacher preparedness;
    - institutional support and educational services; and
    - community awareness and participation
3. What coping strategies do SPED professionals employ to address the challenges encountered in implementing inclusive education?
4. What recommendations can be drawn from the experiences of SPED professionals to strengthen the implementation of inclusive education in rural public schools?
5. Based on the findings, what framework can be proposed to promote sustainable and effective inclusive-education practices in rural schools?

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

*Inclusive Education: Concepts, Policies, and Implementation in the Philippines*

Inclusive education in the Philippines embodies principles that emphasize equitable access, participation, and support for all learners, particularly those with disabilities, within mainstream educational settings. Central to these principles is the removal of barriers—physical, attitudinal, and instructional—that may hinder learners' full inclusion. Practices such as positive behavior support (PBS) reinforce these ideals by fostering a supportive, empathetic school climate that enhances cooperation, reduces behavioral issues, and improves academic outcomes for students with special needs (Iriyani et al., 2025). The Philippine legal framework strongly supports inclusive education, notably through Republic Act No. 11650, which specifically safeguards learners with disabilities by mandating their access to quality education and establishing necessary accommodations and support services within public schools. This law builds upon earlier disability rights legislation but underscores the state's obligation to provide inclusive, non-discriminatory education aligned with international human rights standards. Despite these legal provisions, structural gaps persist wherein exclusions endure due to poverty, stigma, insufficient special education services, and weak monitoring mechanisms (Pinili, 2026).

Implementation of inclusive education in Philippine public schools has experienced both progress and challenges. Teacher readiness varies, positively influenced by length of service and relevant training, underscoring the importance of continuous professional development programs to enhance competencies in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and inclusive instructional practices (Atillo et al., 2025). However, teachers often face obstacles such as limited resources, large class sizes, and insufficient policy support, which can impede effective inclusion (Chigwenembe, 2026). Additionally, school-based management practices that encourage local decision-making and stakeholder engagement contribute moderately to improved educational outcomes and can support inclusive education efforts when properly executed (Ang et al., 2025). To strengthen implementation, it is recommended to enhance teacher training focused on inclusive competency, build capacity for school leaders, and ensure systematic coordination among educational and social welfare agencies. Furthermore, fostering a positive school culture through evidence-based interventions, such as PBS, and ensuring adequate infrastructural and resource support remain crucial. These strategies align with the Philippines' commitment to translate policy into effective, sustainable inclusion that respects the rights and potential of all learners (Ang et al., 2025; Atillo et al., 2025; Iriyani et al., 2025; Pinili, 2026).

*Challenges and Barriers in Implementing Inclusive Education in Rural Schools*

Implementing inclusive education in rural schools comes with a number of challenges that hinder its effective implementation. One major issue is the lack of teaching resources, assistive technologies, and flexible learning spaces, which makes it difficult to fully support students with disabilities. Often, the infrastructure is not accessible, and there is a shortage of specialist support staff needed to handle complex student needs (Banda et al., 2026; Elvira et al., 2024). In addition to these material problems, there is a gap in teacher training. Many teachers in rural areas say that they have not had enough professional development, so they do not feel ready to use inclusive teaching methods, such as adapting the curriculum or using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies. This lack of preparation affects their confidence and ability to help students with different learning needs (Darwish et al., 2025; Elvira et al., 2024). In addition to these logistical and teaching challenges, institutional support is often weak. There is not enough policy enforcement, administrative backing is scarce, and there is poor coordination between agencies, all of which undermine efforts to make inclusion sustainable. In addition, community awareness and acceptance are often lacking. Stigma and negative attitudes toward disability persist, which reduces parental involvement and local support—both crucial for successful inclusion (Banda et al., 2026; Darwish et al., 2025). To tackle these barriers, we need to invest in building teacher capacity through ongoing, context-sensitive professional development. We also need to improve infrastructure to ensure physical accessibility and resource availability, strengthen institutional frameworks for policy implementation and school leadership support, and engage communities to foster positive attitudes and collaborative partnerships. Such coordinated and holistic approaches are essential for transforming rural schools into truly inclusive learning environments that accommodate and empower all learners (Banda et al., 2026; Darwish et al., 2025; Elvira et al., 2024).

*Coping Strategies, Collaboration, and Support Systems of SPED Professionals*

Special Education (SPED) professionals have some effective ways to help students with different learning needs. They focus on adaptive teaching methods and create custom instructional materials. This often involves differentiated instruction, scaffolding, project-based learning, and getting students to work together. These methods are always being tweaked and improved through regular assessments and feedback to keep everyone included and engaged (Bakhytzhamal et al., 2026; Park & Moon, 2026). Technology is also playing a bigger role, with tools like assistive devices and artificial intelligence helping to personalize learning and make it more accessible. However, there are still hurdles such as insufficient teacher training and infrastructure issues that make it difficult to fully integrate AI (Irawan & Anwar, 2025). Collaboration is key to inclusive education. It involves SPED teachers, general education teachers, school administrators, and parents working together. Research shows that this teamwork starts with sharing information and grows into creating lesson plans and strategies together. This is made possible by mutual learning and respect for each other's expertise, as seen in joint projects like Lesson Study between math and SPED teachers (Basister et al., 2026; Fajardo et al., 2026). This collaborative approach provides well-rounded support for students with special needs by combining content knowledge with specialized teaching methods, benefiting both teachers and students.

Sustainable inclusive education practices rely on comprehensive professional development tailored to the needs of SPED professionals and their collaborators. Effective training programs emphasize culturally responsive teaching, curriculum adaptation, and evidence-based instructional practices, often implemented through responsive workshops, mentorship, and community-based partnerships that align with local contexts and priorities (Ciampa & Reisboard, 2024; Glisson et al., 2026). Engaging communities and parents in awareness and capacity-building efforts enhances home-school connections, which are essential for behavior management and acceptance (Mokano & Letuma, 2025). Continuing professional learning, supported by collaborative networks and adaptive technologies, promotes teacher efficacy and resilience, ensuring that inclusive practices remain responsive and effective over time. Altogether, these strategies highlight the comprehensive support system necessary to empower SPED professionals in delivering equitable and quality education within inclusive settings (Bakhytzhamal et al., 2026; Basister et al., 2026; Fajardo et al., 2026).

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of special education (SPED) professionals in implementing inclusive education in rural public schools in Tago District, Surigao del Sur. This approach was appropriate because it focused on understanding the participants' personal experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and recommendations based on their professional practices. The study followed Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological approach to identify common experiences and meanings from the participants' accounts.

The participants consisted of ten (10) SPED professionals from selected rural public elementary and secondary schools in the Tago District, Surigao del Sur, Philippines. They were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in inclusive education in the Philippines. The participants included SPED teachers, coordinators, school-based implementers, and administrators. To qualify, participants were required to have at least one year of relevant professional experience, direct involvement in supporting learners with disabilities, and willingness to participate voluntarily.

A semi-structured interview guide was used as the primary instrument for gathering qualitative data for the study. The questions focused on the participants lived experiences, challenges in implementing inclusive education, available support systems, coping strategies, and recommendations for improvement. Open-ended questions and follow-up inquiries allowed the participants to share their experiences and provide detailed explanations. The interview guide was aligned with the research questions to ensure that the information gathered addressed the study objectives.

Data were collected through individual in-depth interviews after securing the necessary institutional permissions and obtaining informed consent from the participants. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, through telephone calls, or using online communication platforms, depending on the participants' availability and accessibility. Each interview lasted for approximately 30–60 min. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate documentation of their responses. Participant identities were protected through the use of codes P1 to P10, and all information gathered was treated with confidentiality.

The qualitative data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological method. The researcher carefully reviewed the interview transcripts, identified significant statements, formulated meanings, and organized similar responses into emerging themes. These themes were examined and integrated to develop a comprehensive description of the participants' experiences. Member validation was also conducted to verify the accuracy of the interpretations and ensure that the findings reflected the participants' actual experiences.

The trustworthiness of the findings was established using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria were addressed through careful examination of participant responses, detailed descriptions of the research setting, systematic documentation of the data analysis process, and researcher reflexivity.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences of ten special education (SPED) professionals implementing inclusive education in rural public schools in the Tago District, Surigao del Sur. Data obtained through in-depth interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method. The findings were organized into four major areas: lived experiences, implementation challenges, coping strategies, and recommendations for improving inclusive education. The participants' accounts revealed that inclusive education was sustained through learner-centered practices, professional resilience, collaboration, and advocacy despite limitations in educational resources and institutional support.

Table 1. Findings on Inclusive Education Implementation in Rural Schools

| Areas of Inquiry | Major Findings |
|---|---|
| Lived Experiences | Learner-centered practices, collaborative support, professional resilience, and advocacy |
| Implementation Challenges | Limited instructional resources, inadequate professional training, insufficient institutional support, and community attitudes |
| Coping Strategies | Improvised instructional materials, teacher collaboration, continuous professional learning, and community engagement |
| Recommendations | Equitable resource allocation, stronger teacher development, functional support services, and sustained stakeholder partnerships |

*Lived Experiences of SPED Professionals*

The findings revealed that SPED professionals view inclusive education as a commitment to providing equitable learning opportunities for children with diverse needs. The participants emphasized the importance of individualized instruction, curriculum adaptation, and supportive learning environments for students with ASD. They recognized that learners with disabilities require appropriate interventions based on their abilities and their pace.

As Participant 3 explained: "My role as a SPED teacher is to support learners who have different educational needs by providing interventions that match their abilities and learning pace." (P3)

This statement reflects the importance of learner-centred instruction in inclusive education. It also supports Ainscow's (2020) emphasis on removing educational barriers and improving learner participation. The findings suggest that SPED professionals understand inclusion not merely as placing learners with disabilities in regular classrooms but as ensuring meaningful participation through appropriate instructional support.

Collaboration was another important aspect of participants' experiences. SPED professionals emphasized the need to work closely with general education teachers, school administrators, and parents to address learners' needs.

Participant 1 stated: "I also work closely with regular teachers and parents because inclusive education requires teamwork." (P1)

This finding is consistent with Holmqvist and Lelinge (2021), who emphasized collaborative professional development as an important component of inclusive education. The participants' experiences indicate that effective inclusion requires shared responsibility rather than relying solely on SPED teachers.

*Challenges Encountered in Implementing Inclusive Education*

The participants identified several challenges affecting inclusive education in rural schools, including inadequate instructional materials, limited assistive technologies, insufficient teacher training, weak institutional support, and negative community attitudes toward learners with disabilities.

Limited educational resources are a major concern. Participants reported difficulties in obtaining specialized learning materials and appropriate facilities for learners with disabilities.

Participant 8 stated: "The lack of instructional materials and assistive devices remains one of our greatest challenges." (P8)

This finding indicates that resource limitations can affect the delivery of appropriate instructional interventions. From the perspective of the social model of disability, these difficulties represent environmental and institutional barriers that restrict meaningful educational participation rather than limitations arising solely from learners' disabilities (Oliver, 1990).

Professional training was another challenge identified by the participants. Some teachers lacked sufficient preparation to address the diverse learning needs of their students in inclusive classrooms.

Participant 1 shared: "Not all teachers are trained well enough about how to deal with different learners." (P1)

This finding highlights the importance of continuous professional development for both SPED and general education teachers. It also supports Alnahdi and Schwab (2021), who emphasized the relationship between teachers' professional preparation and their confidence in implementing inclusive education.

Participants also identified insufficient institutional support and limited community awareness as barriers. Although national policies promote inclusive education, rural schools may experience difficulties in accessing specialized services and adequate funding. These findings suggest that successful implementation requires stronger coordination among educational authorities, schools, families and communities.

*Coping Mechanisms and Adaptive Strategies*

Despite the challenges encountered, SPED professionals demonstrated resilience and creativity in sustaining inclusive education. Participants adapted instructional strategies, developed low-cost learning materials, participated in professional learning activities, and strengthened their collaboration with other teachers and parents. One participant statement reflected the importance of using available resources:

"We make use of locally available resources and create our own instructional materials when necessary." (P2, P3)

This finding demonstrates how SPED professionals respond to resource limitations through such instructional adaptations. However, while these practices help address immediate classroom needs, they should not replace adequate institutional funding or the provision of appropriate educational resources. The participants also identified collaboration and continuous professional development as important coping strategies for managing stress. They engaged in peer coaching, Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, self-directed learning, and coordination with general education teachers. These practices enable educators to exchange teaching strategies and improve their ability to respond to diverse learning needs.

Community engagement also emerged as an important strategy. Participants conducted parent orientations, home visits, and awareness activities to strengthen family involvement and promote the

acceptance of learners with disabilities. These findings reinforce the importance of collaboration among schools, families, and communities in sustaining inclusive education.

*Recommendations for Strengthening Inclusive Education*

The participants recommended improving resource allocation, professional development, institutional support and community participation. They emphasized the need to provide rural schools with appropriate instructional materials, assistive technology, accessible facilities, and specialized educational services.

Participants also recommended regular training for SPED professionals and general education teachers, particularly in differentiated instruction, classroom management, and individualized educational planning. Strengthening the implementation of Republic Act No. 11650 and establishing functional inclusive learning resource centers were identified as important measures for addressing institutional limitations.

Furthermore, the participants emphasized the importance of stronger collaboration among the Department of Education, school administrators, local government units, parents, and community stakeholders. These recommendations indicate that sustainable inclusive education requires coordinated institutional action rather than depending entirely on individual teachers' efforts.

*Proposed Rural Inclusive Education Sustainability and Empowerment (RIESE) Framework*

Based on the findings, this study developed the Rural Inclusive Education Sustainability and Empowerment (RIESE) Framework to address the challenges experienced by SPED professionals in rural schools. The proposed framework consists of four interconnected dimensions: systemic and policy responsiveness, institutional capacity building, professional empowerment, and home–school–community linkages.

Systemic and policy responsiveness emphasizes equitable resource allocation and effective implementation of inclusive education policies. Institutional capacity building focuses on improving school facilities, specialized support services, and the establishment of functional inclusive learning resource centers. Professional empowerment highlights continuous teacher training, peer collaboration, and instructional adaptation. Home–school–community linkages promote parental participation, community awareness, and partnerships with local stakeholders.

The framework reflects Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory by recognizing that inclusive education is influenced by interactions among individuals, schools, families, communities, and educational institutions. This also aligns with the Social Model of Disability by emphasizing the removal of environmental and institutional barriers.

Overall, the RIESE framework provides a proposed guide for strengthening inclusive education in rural schools. However, its effectiveness requires further implementation and evaluation.

*Synthesis of Findings*

The findings demonstrate that SPED professionals in rural schools remain committed to providing inclusive education, despite limited resources, insufficient professional training, and institutional challenges. Their experiences highlight the importance of learner-centered instruction, collaboration, professional resilience and community participation.

However, the findings also indicate that individual dedication cannot fully compensate for inadequate educational resources and support services. Sustainable inclusive education requires stronger policy implementation, equitable resource distribution, continuous professional development, and coordinated stakeholder involvement. The proposed RIESE framework brings these priorities together to guide future improvements in rural inclusive education.

## CONCLUSION

The findings revealed is that SPED professionals in rural schools are really dedicated to making sure students with disabilities get inclusive learning opportunities, even though they face some tough challenges. Their experiences highlight the importance of tailoring instruction to each student, adapting

the curriculum, being resilient, working together, and engaging with the community to meet a variety of needs. However, inclusive education is still held back by things like limited resources, not enough assistive technologies, insufficient training, weak institutional support, and a lack of community awareness. Despite these hurdles, SPED professionals have shown they can adapt by using improvised teaching materials, collaborating with peers, learning continuously, and involving parents and community stakeholders. The findings also suggest that for inclusive education to really work, it can't just depend on individual teachers. It needs institutional support, resources, effective policy implementation, and ongoing partnerships among schools, families, and communities. The proposed Rural Inclusive Education Sustainability and Empowerment (RIESE) Framework provides a structured approach through responsive policies, building institutional capacity, empowering professionals, and strengthening connections between home, school, and community.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural public schools are encouraged to strengthen inclusive education by ensuring appropriate instructional materials, assistive technologies, accessible facilities, and specialized services. School administrators and educational authorities should prioritize equitable resource allocation and institutional support to address the needs of learners with disabilities. Continuous professional development should be provided for SPED and general education teachers, focusing on differentiated instruction, curriculum adaptation, classroom management, individualized educational planning, and intervention strategies. Collaboration among SPED professionals, teachers, administrators, parents, and community stakeholders is recommended to promote shared responsibility for inclusive learning environments. The Department of Education, local government units, and concerned agencies should reinforce Republic Act No. 11650 and support Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs), particularly in rural communities. Schools should sustain parent orientations, community awareness programs, home-school partnerships, and develop, implement, and evaluate the RIESE Framework.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study focused on the experiences of ten (10) SPED professionals from selected rural public elementary and secondary schools in the Tago District, Surigao del Sur. As this study used a qualitative phenomenological approach, the findings were based on the participants' personal experiences and perspectives. The limited number of participants and specific research setting may not represent the experiences of all SPED professionals in rural schools. Furthermore, this study focused on the challenges, coping strategies, and recommendations related to implementing inclusive education.

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future researchers should conduct similar studies involving a larger number of SPED professionals and general education teachers from different rural schools and districts. Further studies should explore the perspectives of parents, school administrators, and learners with disabilities to gain a broader understanding of inclusive education implementation. The proposed RIESE Framework may also be implemented and evaluated in other rural schools to determine its effectiveness in addressing resource limitations, teacher preparedness, institutional support and community involvement.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

This study adhered to ethical principles for conducting research involving human participants. Permission was obtained from the concerned authorities, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and the participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using participant codes instead of real names. All information gathered was used solely for research.

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## AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to conduct the research, collect data, analyze findings, or develop the conclusions of this study.