



Inclusive Education in a Non-Sectarian Private Educational Institution: A Basis for Policy Making

Lindsay U Mapanoo ^{1*}, Miguela S Ting ²

^{1,2} University of Perpetual Help System Laguna – City of Biñan, Laguna, Philippines

* Corresponding Author: **Lindsay U Mapanoo**

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Abstract

Moving towards inclusion has become a significant step among educational institutions both in international and local fields. This, however, still presents several challenges that must be addressed starting from investigating the ideas of inclusion in an institution including its capability and resources to efficiently deliver and achieve the goals of inclusive education. This study was conducted in a non-sectarian private educational institution in terms of practices, culture, and policies which would be the bases for developing inclusive policies for the school. This involved 292 participants composed of school officials, teachers and staff, parents/guardians, and students through a mixed methods approach. The result of the study yielded to a very high level of inclusion while the qualitative data that were gathered from eight (8) randomly selected participants from the sample size expressed that the barriers in implementing inclusive education were focused on the lack of trainings and skills of teachers and staff to attend to the needs of the diverse learners and the lack of awareness about engaging with students with special needs, and the insufficiency of the resources and facilities to implement inclusive education. While the experiences and effectiveness vary among the participants in terms of positive and negative perception of the implementation of inclusive education, the absence of actual policy about inclusive education has led to the need to craft inclusive policies: these may revolve around skills development, knowledge development, inclusive facilities and resources, sustainability, and assessment and admissions. The high index of inclusion may be rooted in the participants' ideal notion of inclusive education but not as a system due to the absence of actual policies in the school.

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a prominent trend in contemporary education, driven by efforts to provide quality education to all students, regardless of their backgrounds or needs. This shift towards social inclusion is increasingly reflected in various sectors, particularly in educational institutions. Although social inclusion is gaining attention globally, inclusive education stands out as a key area of focus due to its unique challenges and opportunities within the educational setting. Historically, there were already strategies aimed at catering to students with diverse needs, but inclusive education pushes beyond these boundaries, integrating diverse learners within mainstream classrooms. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) played a crucial role in advancing inclusive education globally by advocating for a shift from special needs education, which often segregated students, to inclusive practices within general educational settings (Niholm, 2020). This paradigm shift has presented both opportunities and challenges, particularly in special education, as it encourages diversity within classrooms but also raises questions about how to effectively meet the needs of all learners.

In the Philippines, studies on inclusive education underscore the critical need to address key factors such as teacher training (Dela Fuente, 2021; Domingo, 2020; Carrington, 2020; Raguindin, 2020) [6, 7, 5, 20] and resource availability, particularly in rural areas. These challenges are not only institutional but also systemic, requiring broader policy and structural changes to support inclusion nationwide. Public educational institutions, under the Department of Education (DepEd), have implemented programs aimed at accommodating students with diverse needs. However, these institutions often face difficulties due to limited resources and inadequate teacher training. Private institutions, on the other hand, have more flexibility in choosing whether to accept students with special needs, often based on their capacity to provide necessary services. This disparity has led to overcrowding in public schools and challenges for private institutions in accommodating students with diverse needs, even when they appear to offer an inclusive setting. Despite the potential benefits, the implementation of inclusive education has faced several challenges and criticisms. As Fang (2022) [9] notes, while inclusive education offers diverse learners more opportunities in a barrier-free learning environment, it also brings concerns about the lack of awareness regarding disability and diversity. These challenges can result in discrimination, violence, negative self-perceptions, and a lack of resources to support students' diverse needs.

While the very context of inclusive education has already been established, there was no study conducted focusing on the investigation of inclusive education in private educational institutions in CALABARZON, specifically in Laguna, that tries to establish the possible factors that could be used to come up with policies that would strengthen the implementation of inclusive education in the region and address the challenges that were presented in various studies. Given this landscape, the researcher conducted the study, inclusive education in a non-sectarian private educational institution: a basis for policy making, to address the gap and establish a research-based references in promoting inclusion in the given educational institution.

The study intended to establish the inclusion in a non-sectarian educational institution to produce an inclusive policy, specifically, this aims to answer the following problem:

1. What is the current state of inclusion in the school as regards their policies, practices, and culture for supporting diverse learners?
2. What are the barriers that students with disabilities/students with special educational needs face in accessing quality education?
3. What are the experiences of parents, students, teachers, and administrators regarding inclusion?
4. How effective are the current inclusive practices in promoting academic social participation?
5. What policy could be drawn out of the status of inclusion in the non-sectarian private educational institution?

2. Methods

To assess the level of inclusion and identify the presence of inclusive policies, programs, practices, and resource materials in a non-sectarian educational institution, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. The qualitative component involved a case study analysis, which focuses on

investigating an individual, a group, an organization, or an event in-depth. The goal is to explore existing issues within the area of concern. To complement this, the quantitative approach will be used to numerically assess and describe the level of inclusion in the institution, providing measurable data to support the findings. Using a non-probability sampling technique, 292 respondents were identified which include school officials, teachers and staff, parents/guardians, and students for the quantitative part of the study while eight (8) of the sample size were selected to be part of the interview for the qualitative data.

The Index for Inclusion, developed by Tony Booth, Mel Ainscow, and Denise Kingston (2002) was used, specifically the Part 1 Questionnaire of the Index, was used to determine the level of inclusion of the respondents. The tool that was distributed has two parts where the first part is from the adopted questionnaire – the Index for Inclusion consists of a checklist with indicators, descriptors, and questions designed to evaluate and assess the degree of inclusion within schools, while promoting actions to remove or reduce obstacles to participation and advancing the inclusion process. The tool's key components focus on three main dimensions: a) creating inclusive cultures, b) producing inclusive policies, and c) evolving inclusive practices. These dimensions will guide the respondents in their self-evaluation and shape their perceptions of inclusion within the educational institution. The tool for the quantitative part of the study has undergone a validation process to establish its reliability and validity including the conduct of a pilot testing and using Cronbach's Alpha which was 0.68758. This shows that the internal validity may appear to be weak but not necessarily unacceptable. The qualitative part of the questionnaire was derived from the statement of the problem to properly understand the participants perspectives of inclusive education in the investigated educational institution. This was composed of three main questions detailing about the barriers, experiences, and effectiveness of the perceived implementation of inclusive education in the school. Furthermore, the reviewed memos, correspondence, letters, and communications, were incorporated into the case study analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the institution's inclusive practices.

Initially, the researcher sought approval from the panel to proceed with the data collection phase through a preliminary presentation. Upon approval, the researcher sent a formal letter to the college president or the appropriate higher officer at Saint Michael's College of Laguna, requesting permission to conduct the study. Upon permission, the researcher distributed the modified Index for Inclusion: Part 1 in both physical and electronic formats, depending on what was most convenient for the respondents. Included with the questionnaire was an informed consent form, which respondents were asked to sign to confirm their voluntary participation in the study. After the collection of the quantitative data, the researcher reached out to those who expressed their willingness to be the participants for the interview which was the second part of the data. The eight participants were asked the same questions based on their respective role in the institution. Their responses were recorded and tabulated for analyses.

Additionally, the researcher requested relevant documents, such as memos, correspondence, letters, and communications, to review as part of the investigation into the institution's policies and activities related to inclusion. In-

person interviews were conducted to randomly selected participants from each category to provide narrative responses for the study. After gathering the data, the researcher tabulated the results from both the physical and electronic questionnaires, along with the findings from the documents, for subsequent analysis.

3. Results and Discussions

This presents the analysis and interpretation of the gathered data, emphasizing on determining the level of inclusion of a non-sectarian educational institution to develop an inclusive policy.

Table 1 shows the level of inclusion among school officials, teachers and staff, parents/guardians, and students of the non-sectarian private educational institution. The collective responses reflected an average rating of 3.49, which indicated a very high index of inclusion. This result may have been influenced by the respondents' ideal perspective on the nature of inclusive education, particularly focusing on its philosophical and theoretical foundations.

The index results were based on the experiences, perceptions, and observations of the institution's members and stakeholders. This aligned with the findings of Kefallinou, Symeonidou, and Meijer (2020) ^[12], who affirmed that inclusive education could initially be perceived from an idealistic standpoint, which may eventually be translated into practical implementation to ensure the participation of all individuals in an active and sustainable learning environment.

Moreover, this reflects the emphasis that Leijen, Arcidiacono, and Baucal (2021) ^[14] mentioned as regards the efforts that the institution must exert in creating a culture that would accommodate all students built on a deeper intention to make the marginalized, persons with disabilities, access quality education. There are varying perceptions as regards the values and essence of implementing inclusive education depending on the setting and other factors which could affect the inclusive education experiences of every stakeholder.

This also affirms the findings of Vakaliuk *et al.* (2021) ^[27] that the school must cultivate an inclusive culture that goes beyond the classroom, engaging the wider community, parents, and local organizations. By adopting these changes, educational institutions can enhance the inclusion index within both society and the educational sector, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone. This transformation also demands a sustained commitment to ongoing improvement, innovation, and regular evaluation to ensure that the diverse needs of learners are consistently addressed.

Table 1: The current state of inclusion in the school

	Index for Inclusion	Interpretation
School Officials	3.61	Very High
Teachers and Staff	3.55	Very High
Parents/Guardians	3.39	Very High
Students	3.41	Very High
Overall	3.49	Very High

The barriers that students with disabilities/students with special educational needs face in accessing quality education

The qualitative data from the participants, specifically the school officials, showed a positive regard for inclusive education within the educational institution, with no

perceived barriers. Meanwhile, teachers and staff believed that factors such as the facility, resources, the existing curriculum, personnel's skills, and resistance to change could affect the implementation of inclusive education. On the other hand, parents/guardians and students perceived the environment—specifically the school personnel and other students—as barriers to the progress of inclusive education due to a lack of awareness and openness about students with special educational needs. This generates a theme of insufficiency of teachers' trainings and preparedness as expressed by the different attitudes of the other stakeholders towards students with special educational needs.

The results of the data presented confirm the findings of Domingo (2020) ^[7] and Dela Fuente (2021) ^[6], who discussed the struggles educational institutions face when implementing inclusive education, particularly concerning the school's resources, the skills of teachers and key implementers, and the lack of awareness among individuals surrounding students with special educational needs. These factors have continuously altered the landscape of inclusion in various locales, presenting challenges to the advancement of inclusive education.

The experiences of students, parents, teachers and staff, and school officials regarding inclusion

As described in the responses from the participants, the school officials reported positive experiences with inclusive education in the school, citing the effectiveness of the approaches and policies that were being implemented. While teachers and staff expressed concerns about the accessibility and readiness of the school's facilities to accommodate students with special educational needs, particularly those with physical disabilities, they still recognized the importance of participation and collaboration in the implementation of inclusive education. The results also revealed that parents/guardians had concerns regarding the lack of awareness among some students about those with special educational needs, which could primarily affect the inclusive education experiences of others. From the students' perspective, the experience of inclusion held greater value through the culture that had been established in the educational community, including the importance of the social environment within the school to maintain and implement inclusivity. This presents a theme of mixed experiences among students with special educational needs considering the varying perceptions of the stakeholders towards special education.

There were similarities in the ideas of positive experiences among school officials, parents/guardians, and students, as their perceptions were rooted in their daily experiences of belongingness in the school. Teachers and staff, however, did not necessarily report negative experiences, but their perceptions of being with students with special educational needs in the classroom and provisional settings differed. This difference stemmed from the lack of an actual program that compelled them to try varying approaches, as well as the absence of the proper skills to do so.

It was described that there were different reasons why the implementation of inclusive education could be seen from varying perspectives, depending on various factors (Leijen, Arcidiacono, & Baucal, 2021) ^[14]. The sense of belongingness and participation may have been key components that balanced the ideas of including students with special needs in a regular or mainstream classroom

setting. Although the severity of a child's condition may have influenced other stakeholders' perspectives on inclusion (Kupper, Oun, Tatomi, & Simson, 2020), the role of the school, with its teaching and non-teaching personnel, as well as its policies, likely altered the perceptions of others. This also emphasized the need for more appropriate and accurate facilities and resources to be utilized to improve the implementation of inclusion in the given school setting.

The effectiveness of the current inclusive practices in promoting academic social participation

Based on the data provided by the participants, the effectiveness of the implementation of inclusive education in the school is balanced between several factors: acceptance and accommodations, training and resources, and knowledge and skills. The school officials, along with some parents and students, believed that the school's policies of accommodating and accepting students with diverse conditions, allowing them to enroll and study, were successful steps toward inclusion. On the other hand, teachers, along with some parents and students, felt that merely accepting students would not guarantee the actual objectives of inclusive education. There were still key components lacking, especially in the teachers' and staff's skills in delivering instructions and services. This includes the fact that some teachers lacked proper knowledge and skills to effectively address the diverse needs of students with disabilities. This generates a theme of improved or developed participation among students despite the learning gaps that may still be visible due to the lack of actual resources and facilities for special education in the educational institution. Moreover, there were no formal memoranda, programs, correspondences, or communications related to inclusion and inclusive education issued by the school in the past five years. This lack of documentation somewhat supports the absence of a formal and comprehensive policy regarding the implementation of inclusive education in the school.

The results align with the findings of local studies conducted both internationally and, in the Philippines, (Domingo, 2020; Leijen, Arcidiacono, & Baucal, 2020; Dela Fuente, 2021; Nunez & Rosales, 2021; Fang, 2022) [7, 6, 9, 14, 17], which assert that the challenges in implementing inclusive education primarily stem from the lack of adequate training and skills among the implementers, particularly the teachers. Additionally, the availability of resources and facilities to properly accommodate students with special educational needs is a significant factor in enhancing the perception of other stakeholders towards inclusion. However, this does not discount the importance of the social environment's awareness and acceptance, which plays a critical role in enabling students with diverse needs to thrive and access quality education.

Policy matrix drawn out of the status of inclusion in the non-sectarian educational institution

The results of the data collected have been utilized to propose an inclusive education policy for the non-sectarian private educational institution, focusing on the following key areas:

1. **Skills Development:** Based on the findings, it has been proposed that essential skills be acquired to support students with special educational needs through training and development programs. Key individuals will be identified to facilitate this process. Subcomponents include benchmarking, capability enhancement training,

skills assessment, and evaluation. This aims to address the existing gaps in training and skills among key personnel, helping them develop the necessary competencies to provide effective support to students with special educational needs.

2. **Knowledge Development:** The lack of awareness and misunderstanding about the diversity of students with special educational needs, as well as prejudice and reluctance toward their inclusion, were identified as challenges. In response, it is proposed that all stakeholders receive comprehensive and accurate information about inclusive education and its objectives. Collaboration with parents and guardians will also be encouraged, focusing on advocacy, awareness, and acceptance. This initiative will help cultivate a culture of inclusivity within the community.
3. **Inclusive Facilities and Resources:** The results also highlighted challenges in providing the necessary facilities and resources, which depend on the school's revenue and population size. To address this, the proposal includes directing funds and allocations toward improving accessibility and acquiring resources for students with special educational needs. Subcomponents include accessibility, utilization, and efficiency, ensuring the procurement and acquisition of necessary equipment and outsourced services are done efficiently.
4. **Sustainability:** Given the absence of formal or direct policies on inclusive education, the results pointed to the need for sustainability measures. The proposed policies include the establishment of a framework to ensure the long-term success of inclusive education initiatives. This will involve subcomponents such as monitoring and evaluation to assess the progress of inclusive education implementation.
5. **Assessment and Admissions:** While not specifically mentioned by respondents, the importance of formal assessment and admission processes was highlighted. The proposed policies suggest implementing a formal assessment process to identify students with special educational needs. Despite the absence of a formal program, the proposal affirms that inclusion is already being practiced and that formal assessments from partner professionals would enhance the school's ability to accommodate students through its admissions policies.

Inclusive practices require specialized competencies and expertise. Based on the findings, it is proposed that educational institutions focus on continuous professional development and retraining for their specialists to support socially disadvantaged students. This will help develop the skills of teachers, universities, and society at large. Increasing demand for professionals with advanced skills in special pedagogy and psychology has prompted educational institutions to invest in these areas (Shutaleva *et al.*, 2023; Tristani & Basset-Gunter, 2020; Radojlovic, 2022) [23, 26, 19].

By adopting inclusive policies and practices, the school can enhance learner outcomes and promote long-term social inclusion. The proposed policies also emphasize key interconnected factors in fostering inclusive practices, such as policies, funding, school organization, leadership, school climate, classroom strategies, curriculum development, teacher training, and collaboration. The European Agency (as cited by Kefallinou, Symeonidou, & Meijer, 2020) [12] affirms that the inclusion process must strengthen mainstream

schools' ability to address learner diversity by offering support at three key levels: the school, classroom, and community (Kefallinou *et al.*, 2020) ^[12].

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, based on the results of the Index of Inclusion, the educational institution which was being investigated has reflected a very high level of inclusion which suggests that the people within the institution expressed that their institution manifests the ideals of an inclusive education which was accompanied by their personal experiences and perception as they engage with each other, in connection to the programs, activities, and engagements among various individuals in the school.

There were identified barriers among the participants focus on the lack of resources and facilities for inclusion, competencies of the personnel, lack of awareness of other stakeholders towards inclusive education which leads to resistance to change, and actual policies of the implementation of inclusive education. There was a perceived positive experience towards inclusive education by school officials and staff while there is a balance of negative and positive experiences of inclusive education among teachers and staff, parents/guardians, and students citing the experiences of belongingness, participation, and collaboration in the school through its activities. The effectivity of the implementation of inclusive education policies in the non-sectarian private educational institution varies among the stakeholders considering their positions and varying experiences of inclusion. However, there was no actual policy that is being implemented in the school relative to inclusive education.

In reference to the intention of the policy to establish bases for developing inclusive policies, the key components of the developed policy matrix which could be developed for inclusive education in the non-sectarian private educational institution being observed may revolved around a) skills development with subcomponents on benchmarking, capability enhancement training, skills assessment, and evaluation; b) knowledge development with subcomponents on advocacy, awareness, and acceptance; c) inclusive facilities and resources with subcomponents on accessibility, utilization, and efficiency; d) sustainability with subcomponents on monitoring and evaluation; and additionally, e) assessment and admissions.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations for possible action are presented based on the highlighted findings and conclusions:

1. The school administrators may consider the proposed basis for the policy of implementing inclusive education in the school to properly promote inclusion among the institution's stakeholders. Moreover, considering the implementation of inclusive education in the school will enrich the diversity in the educational community and expand the school's thrust to accessible quality education.
2. The teachers and staff may refer to this study's outcomes so they may have a supporting data and information in seeking competency and skills training to enhance their skills. This may also encourage them to pursue higher education specializing in special education to strengthen their capacity and expanding the array of services that the institution they are serving may provide to its

stakeholders.

3. The parents/guardians may see and recognize their roles and values in the collaboration with the school's advocacies, programs, and policies. This may also enable them to change their varying perspectives towards students with special educational needs and promote a more inclusive social environment as well as a better community for their children.
4. The students, through the programs and policies to be developed, may enhance their participation in creating an inclusive environment among their peers. This will lead to a more inclusive culture which will eventually promote a more welcoming environment for students with special educational needs.

The researcher may use the results of this study to further expand their interest in the field of special education through policy making and developing other mechanisms which will promote social inclusion. This may also serve as a springboard to explore a wider locality.

The future researchers may utilize this study as reference in their related research endeavors focusing on inclusive policy making and/or fill the gaps that this study may leave. They may also widen their future studies by expanding this study's limitations exploring the context of inclusion involving the marginalized, specifically the sexual and gender minorities, and other sectors.

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