

Not a Long Shot Anymore: Gearing Towards Development of Intervention Program for Enhancing General Education Learners' Relationship with Special Needs Education Learners

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Publication Date: April 30, 2026

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19921303](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19921303)

Abstract

The study targeted to examine the manifestations of behavior of general education learners toward special needs education learners along cognitive understanding, behavioral intent, and affective response; to evaluate an inclusive classroom ambassador program developed through the ADDIE model; and to assess the effectiveness of how peer-led interventions could improve behavioral inclusion. A descriptive-evaluative research design was implored and 48 Grade Four to Six learners were involved in a month-long peer-led intervention that included ambassador selection and training, peer cascading, as well as an inclusive awareness day, which occurred over a duration of four weeks from February to March 2025. Measuring attitudes prior to and after the program, the Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes Towards Children with Handicaps Scale (CATCH) was implemented, as well as identifying changes to attitudes using Descriptive Statistics and the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test. Results indicated that there was a strong cognitive understanding of special needs education learners at baseline ($M = 2.46$) but that no significant improvement was demonstrated with post-test data ($M = 2.46$, $p = .144$). However, there was a significant improvement in behavioral intent from pre-test ($M = 2.04$) to post-test ($M = 2.36$) ($p < .001$) and that affective response scores increased slightly but not significantly from pre-test ($M = 2.06$) to post-test ($M = 2.11$) ($p = .611$). Overall, the program increased prosocial behavior, peer support and inclusionary, inclusive practices in the classroom, along with improved student ambassadors' leadership and communication capabilities. However, based on this study, further research is required to continue understanding the effectiveness of peer-led inclusion programs in improving behavioral inclusion, and that additional factors may need to be considered such as longer-duration or more intensive interventions that bring about changes to affective attitudes.

Keywords: *general education, special needs education, inclusive education, Descriptive Statistics, Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes Towards Children with Handicaps Scale (CATCH)*



I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education focused on access, participation, and effective learning experiences that reach all learners despite their ability. An integral component of inclusive education is a feeling of belongingness that creates positive friendships, socialization, and learning collaborations among students. In an inclusive classroom setting, effective interactions between Gen Ed and SNED learners may have a positive impact on a socially responsible and socially just education setting. This is mandated under RA 11650 otherwise known as “Inclusive Education Act” that there is a need to develop an inclusive learning environment. Learners in the Gen Ed group have shown that they were able to display patience, sympathy, and open-mindedness to help SNED group members (Garrote et al., 2020). Moreover, having positive attitudes about inclusion promoted a peaceful democracy in a school culture (Euscategui & Saavedra, 2024). Furthermore, evidence-based practices such as peer tutoring and disability awareness were believed to promote peer relationships (Schwab et al., 2021).

However, in most classes, evidence-based practices were not well utilized, which means that learners in the SNED group were likely to be socially isolated, whereas the Gen Ed learners will also not have the skills for interacting socially. Previous research on inclusive education in the Philippines has mainly centered on curriculum development, teacher preparedness, and teaching approaches (Namanyane & Shaoan, 2021; Lin et al., 2025; Echsel et al., 2025). Nevertheless, there is a lack of literature on interventions that foster structured peer relationships within the indigenous classroom setting. This study is a development on previous literature on inclusive education for it has developed an intervention program referred to as the “Inclusive Classroom Ambassadors Program” with the objective of enhancing Gen Ed-SNED interaction, acceptance, and cooperation. Unlike past literature on inclusive education that was based on a structural approach, this study is informed by a social approach that motivated Gen Ed student cognitive understanding, behavioral intentions, and affective response towards their SNED peers.

Review of Related Literature

The current perspectives view disability as the outcome of interactions between personal traits and obstacles or barriers external to the individual. According to these perspectives, the role of disability awareness initiatives has been proven to be of critical importance in changing attitudes or reducing stigmas related to persons with disabilities. Research has found that certain disability awareness interventions, particularly for learners, have been effective in improving attitudes or acceptance of persons with disabilities (Gonzales et al., 2025; Wickenden et al., 2022; Qandeel et al., 2025; Álvarez-Delgado et al., 2022). The interventions have been found to be particularly effective for learners, particularly where these interventions have been integrated into daily life or school contexts.

The concept of inclusive education transcends physical access to the classrooms of the mainstream education domain. True inclusion involved a exemplary change in the



culture and practices of schools that allow all to be valued and actively involved. UNESCO (2020) and Ainscow (2020) both place emphasis on the fact that inclusion begins and ends with relationships and the sense of connectedness felt among the members of the inclusive education domain. Recent studies placed a greater emphasis on the role that the students themselves must assume, and the concept that when involved as members of the classroom domain, they themselves internalize inclusion and can therefore sustain it (Messiou, 2024).

Social norms in the classroom and the overall learning environment significantly impact inclusive behaviors among individuals. Studies have shown that peers modeling inclusive behaviors and reinforcement from teachers and parents significantly contribute to the social inclusion of individuals with special needs education (SNED). Simple forms of inclusion, such as greeting, inviting, or helping others in the classroom or in the school setting, have been influenced by norms in the peer culture, contributing to social inclusion and a sense of belonging among individuals (Siperstein et al., 2022). Moreover, controlled peer interaction or engagement in peer activities has been proven effective in enhancing inclusive behaviors among individuals with SNED and in bridging the social distance between one another (Biggs & Robinson, 2022).

In addition, prior interactions with SNED students were consistently found to be crucial factors in influencing attitudes towards inclusion. Research argued that meaningful and positive interactions with these students foster empathy, openness, and cooperative attitudes among regular students (Freer, 2021; Tarantino & Neville, 2023; Kuutti et al., 2021). Conversely, a lack of interaction or negative experiences may solidify fear, misconceptions, and exclusion. These findings argued with contact theory, which emphasized the importance of interactions in influencing students' perceptions and attitudes towards students with special needs education.

Apart from social and attitudinal outcomes, the academic consequences of inclusive education have been widely investigated. It is observed that proper inclusion, through various means like access to the general curriculum, co-teaching arrangements, differentiated instruction, and peer collaboration, is beneficial in enhancing academic performance among students with special needs education (Bose & Heymann, 2020; Cole et al., 2020). For the typically developing peers, the effects of inclusion were found to be neutral to slightly positive academically, while it enhanced social competence and collaborative skills simultaneously. These findings collectively bring out the view that well-implemented inclusive practices support not only equity but also overall educational quality.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to analyze, design, develop, implement and evaluate an intervention program that will help to create positive relationship behaviors and social interactions between Gen Ed students toward their SNED peers. Specifically, this study explored learners' (1) manifestations of behavior along Cognitive Understanding, Behavioral Intent, and Affective Response; (2) designed and implemented an intervention program to enhance learners' positive relationship behaviors



and social interactions toward their SNED peers; and (3) evaluated the effectiveness of this program in order to determine and assess behavioral changes of participants over the three recognized areas.

II. MATERIALS and METHODS

Research Design

The research design employed was descriptive evaluative, which was selected to assess the current behavior of general education students and evaluate the impact of the Peer Inclusion Network (PIN) - Inclusive Classroom Ambassador Program. The descriptive design portion of the model assessed learners' behavior towards special needs education (SNED) students based on cognitive, behavioral, and affective aspects of their learning, both prior to and after being accepted into the program. The evaluative design portion provided benchmarks for assessing effectiveness of the program, based on comparison between pre and posttest findings.

Participants

The participants were composed of 48 learners from Grades 4 to 6 in General Education from Tagkawayan Central Elementary School. The respondents were selected based on the method of purposive sampling with consideration of the teachers' recommendations and established criteria for effective and significant participation and response from the learners who qualify based on the following characteristics: bona fide students who manifest interest and willingness to understand the concepts of inclusion and special needs education, manifestations of commitment and intent for promoting inclusion, and possession of communication and leadership attributes.

Grades 4 to 6 were chosen for this study based on the cognitive, social, and emotional abilities of the learners that enabled them to comprehend diversity, have empathy towards others, as well as promote an inclusive culture, since they can participate actively in activities alongside their peers. The equal number of males and females within the chosen grades helped to balance the study sample to avoid any anticipated bias based on gender differences.

Instrument

This research adapted the Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes toward Children with Handicaps (CATCH) Scale to assess general education learners' behaviors toward peers with special needs before and after the Peer Inclusion Network (PIN)-Inclusive Classroom Ambassador Program. The instrument was modified by replacing "children with handicaps" with locally appropriate terminology, as permitted by the original author.



Content validity and clarity were established through expert validation by Romeo M. Sumayo. The scale, shown to be valid and reliable across cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains (Llanes et al., 2023), used a 5-point Likert format (0 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree), interpreted from Very Low to Very High. The program development followed the ADDIE Model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation) to ensure a systematic process. Pilot testing was conducted with a comparable group to assess clarity, feasibility, and timing, with feedback used for refinement. Content validity was further established through expert evaluation by five master teachers and one SNED specialist, while reliability testing confirmed the consistency of the measurement tools, strengthening the study's methodological rigor.

Data Gathering Procedure

In addition, it was anchored to the ADDIE model (Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate) to systematically plan, implement, and assess the Peer Inclusion Network (PIN): Inclusive Classroom Ambassadors Program. The procedure ensured consistent, reliable, and valid data collection aligned with the research objectives.

Analyze Phase

Baseline data on general education learners' behaviors, social interactions, and attitudes toward SNED learners were gathered using a structured checklist (CATCH Scale). Results were analyzed to identify prevailing relationship patterns, which informed the design of an evidence-based intervention.

Design Phase

The PIN program was designed based on inclusive education principles, social learning theory, and peer mediation. Structured modules focused on empathy, leadership, communication, and peer support. Interactive and experiential activities were incorporated, and the program was refined through expert and teacher feedback.

Development Phase

Training materials, activity guides, and learning resources were developed and refined based on feedback. Materials were culturally appropriate, learner-centered, and aligned with inclusive values such as empathy, cooperation, and acceptance.

Implement Phase

Selected student ambassadors were trained and deployed as peer facilitators. The program was introduced school-wide (pilot-tested) through Inclusive Awareness Day. Ongoing monitoring by teachers and the researcher ensured fidelity to the program design and allowed timely adjustments.

Evaluate Phase



Post-intervention data were collected using the same checklist to measure changes in cognitive understanding, behavioral intent, and affective response. Participant feedback and outcome analysis showed improvements in peer acceptance, collaboration, and diversity awareness. Findings supported the program's effectiveness and guided further refinement and potential for wider implementation.

Data Analysis Techniques

The researcher used statistical methods to examine whether general education learners would show measurable differences in their understanding in special needs education learners before and after participating in the Peer Inclusion Network program.

A descriptive statistic was used, which included mean and standard deviation, to measure students' attitudes in Objective 1 which showed both their attitude level and their degree of attitude variation. The mean score represented the overall direction and favorability of attitudes, with higher values indicating more positive dispositions toward SNEd learners. The standard deviation explained how far responses varied from each other because students showed more similar opinions when standard deviation values were small yet they had greater attitude differences between them when standard deviation values were high.

However, Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was used to compare pre-test results with post-test results in three domains which included cognitive and behavioral and affective development for Gen. Ed. learners. This non-parametric test was deemed appropriate due to the paired nature of the data and its suitability for measuring changes in the same group of respondents over time. The analysis showed how the PIN intervention affected learners' attitudes toward their peers who received special needs education.

III. RESULTS

Manifestation of Behavior of General Education Learners

Results showed that the general education learners possessed positive attitudes towards their peers with special needs even before the implementation of the program across cognitive understanding, behavioral intent, and affective response as reflected in the obtained mean scores.

In the cognitive understanding, as shown in table 1, students showed a well-developed and empathetic understanding of the learners with special needs education since, as shown by the mean scores, the students knew that the peers with special needs education were in dire need of support ($M = 3.02$), that these peers enjoy attention from adults ($M = 2.94$), and that the peers with special needs education prefer to be socially involved with the other members of the class rather than staying isolated as shown by the mean score of the students' answers ($M = 2.90$). Most notably, the idea that students with

special needs education were isolated socially was clearly rebuffed by the students ($M = 1.33$).

Table 1. Cognitive Understanding Before Program Implementation

INDICATORS	M	SD	Qualitative Index
Children with special needs education want lots of attention from adults. (<i>Ang mga batang may espesyal na pangangailangan ay nais ng maraming atensyon mula sa mga matatanda.</i>)	2.94	1.01	High
Children with special needs education don't like to make friends. (<i>Ang mga batang may espesyal na pangangailangan ay hindi gustong makipagkaibigan.</i>)	1.33	0.89	Very Low
Children with special needs education want to play with other children. (<i>Ang mga batang may espesyal na pangangailangan ay nais maglaro kasama ang ibang mga bata.</i>)	2.90	1.47	High
Children with special needs education need lots of help to do things. (<i>Ang mga batang may espesyal na pangangailangan ay nangangailangan ng maraming tulong upang gawin ang mga bagay.</i>)	3.02	1.67	High
General Mean	2.37	0.42	Low

Behavioral intent results showed predominantly positive and prosocial behavioral intentions in Table 2. The highest behavioral intention was related to protective intentions, protecting their classmates with special needs education from teasing, for which the highest mean was obtained ($M = 3.21$). The intention to include their special needs education classmates in a social setting like parties ($M = 2.83$) and parties like lunchtime ($M = 2.81$) was found to be moderate but positive. Moreover, exclusionary behavioral intentions were rejected, as seen from low means obtained for avoiding introductions to friends ($M = 0.83$). The findings showed that general education students have a positive behavioral intent.

Table 2. Behavioral Intent Before Program Implementation

INDICATORS	M	SD	Qualitative Index
Would stick up for a child with special needs education who was being teased. (<i>Ipagtatanggol ko ang batang may espesyal na pangangailangan na pinagtatawanan.</i>)	3.21	1.08	High
Would invite a child with special needs education to my birthday party. (<i>Iimbitahan ko ang batang may espesyal na pangangailangan sa aking kaarawan.</i>)	2.83	1.10	High
Would not introduce a child with special needs education to my friends. (<i>Hindi ko ipakikilala ang batang may espesyal na pangangailangan sa mga kaibigan ko.</i>)	0.83	1.62	Very Low
Would invite a child with special needs education to eat lunch with me. (<i>Iimbitahan ko ang batang may espesyal na pangangailangan na kumain ng tanghalian kasama ko.</i>)	2.81	1.57	High
General Mean	2.04	0.48	Low

Positive dispositions of study participants were demonstrated through their affective responses shown on Table 3. Empathy emerged as the strongest emotional indicator, receiving the highest mean score ($M = 3.23$), which researcher assessed as Excellent because it demonstrated authentic emotional comprehension and empathy. Students showed positive feelings about collaborative learning through group projects which received a mean score of 3.00 and they showed positive feelings about social interaction which received a mean score of 2.81. The special needs education students showed readiness to work together with their peers. Students showed maximum fear-based attitudes which produced a mean score of 0.77 that evaluated as Very Low because it demonstrated an extreme rejection of negative or avoidant emotions. The data indicated that general education students established a strong affective foundation which included acceptance and emotional security together with openness to inclusive classroom practices.

Table 3. Affective Response Before Program Implementation

INDICATORS	M	SD	Qualitative Index
Would feel good doing a school project with a child with special needs education. (<i>Maganda ang pakiramdam kapag gumawa ng proyekto sa paaralan kasama ang batang may espesyal na pangangailangan.</i>)	3.00	0.87	High
Would be pleased if a child with special needs education invited me to their house. (<i>Ikalulugod na maimbitahan ng isang batang may espesyal na pangangailangan sa kanilang bahay.</i>)	2.81	1.04	High
Would be afraid of a child with special needs education. (<i>Matatakot sa isang batang may espesyal na pangangailangan.</i>)	0.77	1.01	Very Low
Feel sorry for children with special needs education. (<i>Naiisip ang kalagayan ng mga batang may espesyal na pangangailangan.</i>)	3.23	1.29	High
General Mean	2.06	0.42	Low

Design, Develop, and Implement a Program

The Peer Inclusion Network (PIN), an Inclusive Classroom Ambassadors Program, was developed to promote the involvement of students as active participants and supporters of peers with special needs education, creating a culture of inclusion in the school. This was achieved through a systematic approach in the development of the program to include the formulation of the objectives, the activities to be covered, and the outcomes of the program, after which expert opinion was obtained from teachers, administrators, and stakeholders to assess the evaluative criteria of the program. This was done before the final approval by the administrators to ensure compliance.

Ambassadors in the Peer Inclusion Network were selected upon teacher recommendations based on their demonstration of positive social characteristics and leadership potential. Parental consent was gathered in order to maintain ethical standards. These selected students had then undergone systematic training in the tenets of inclusive education, kinds of disabilities, effective communication skills, advocacy, and leadership. Ambassadors then provided peer-led activities and discussions promoting practice dissemination among general education learners. Activities in the PIN program culminated in an Inclusive Awareness Day that promoted school-wide participation in the celebration of diversity. In summary, the PIN program aimed at student leader development who are empathetic, well-informed, and proactive in advocating for inclusive educational settings.

Effectiveness of the Program

Findings have shown differentiated effects of the intervention program in all areas of cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains of general education learners' attitudes toward students with special needs education (SNED).

Table 4 showed a positive level of cognitive understanding of general education learners toward SNED peers, with an overall mean score of 2.46. The result, however, failed to reveal significant changes in cognitive perception levels after conducting a hypothesis test between the pre- and post-program, showing no significant change, with a value of $p = .144$. This has shown that learners generally possess a basic level of cognitive understanding and knowledge of SNED learners' educational needs, but there was no marked improvement in cognitive perception levels of SNED learners following the program, possibly since cognitive perception is generally positive.

Table 4. Cognitive Understanding After Program Implementation

Measurement Period	Mean (M)	SD	Qualitative Index	Mean Difference	z-value	p-value	Interpretation ($\alpha=0.05$)
Before Implementation	2.37	0.42	Moderately Positive	--	--	--	--
After Implementation	2.46	0.29	Moderately Positive	+0.09	-1.462	0.144	Not Significant

In contrast, the program had a strong and statistically significant impact on students' behavioral intentions. This is supported by the following results, which showed on Table 5 that mean scores shifted from 2.04 (SD = 0.48) prior to program implementation to 2.36 (SD = 0.36) after program implementation. The results were statistically significant ($z = -4.549$, $p < .001$) with a large effect size ($r = -0.657$), which confirmed that the program had a significant influence on students' willingness to behave in ways that are positive and supportive towards their fellow students with SNED.

Table 5. Behavioral Intent After Program Implementation

Measurement Period	Mean (M)	SD	Mean Diff.	z-value	p-value	Decision ($\alpha = 0.05$)	Effect Size (r)	Magnitude
Before Implementation	2.04	0.48	--	--	--	--	--	--
After Implementation	2.36	0.36	+0.32	-4.549	<.001	Reject Null (Significant)	-0.657	Large

Affective response demonstrated a "Moderately Positive" attitude at the beginning (M = 2.06, SD = 0.42), as reference to Table 6. This level improved slightly after the program (M = 2.12, SD = 0.22). While the difference was not significant ($z = -0.508$, $p =$



0.611), the sharp decrease in the standard deviation suggested a more cohesive level of emotions among the learners. This essentially speaks to a more uniform empathy within the classroom, regardless of the lack of significant increase overall. Thus, the aggregate of the data suggested the program was most successful at reinforcing intentions in the behavioral domain and the learners' emotions, while their level of cognition was unaffected.

Table 6. Affective Response After Program Implementation

Measurement Period	Mean (M)	SD	Qualitative Index	Mean Difference	z-value	p-value	Interpretation ($\alpha=0.05$)
Before Implementation	2.06	0.42	Moderately Positive	--	--	--	--
After Implementation	2.12	0.22	Moderately Positive	+0.06	-0.508	0.611	Not Significant

IV. DISCUSSION

Findings confirm that intentional peer-mediated interventions can develop inclusive behaviors towards peers with special needs among general education students. While cognitive outcomes revealed no change, learners have high average baseline knowledge, the intervention strengthened existing beliefs versus changing those beliefs and supports a plateau effect for learners. However, the reduction in variability indicates that learners had more consistent views of peers with special needs, thus leading to sustained inclusion. No significant improvement was found with respect to affective outcomes; however, slight gains and reduced variability do indicate stronger emotional attitudes toward peers with special needs may have resulted from the intervention. Affective attitudes generally take a long time to change; therefore, while the program developed a more homogeneous emotional climate, deeper change may require additional time of exposure. Conversely, however, significant gains were seen with respect to behavioral intent resulting in a large effect size, indicating structured peer interactions and guided activities translated attitudes about inclusive behavior into actual inclusive behaviors consistent with Social Cognitive Theory. Taken together, this program adds to the importance of designing intentionally and providing meaningful peer interactions in order to achieve authentic participation and social integration.

Implications for practice indicate the need to implement evidence-based and peer-mediated interventions that encourage students to participate in appropriate, behaviorally engaged, structured interactions with their peers (i.e., increased peer interaction) while providing teachers with the support needed to effectively facilitate these interactions. Policies that support the sustained, ongoing implementation of inclusive practices are also important. Limitations of the current study include a short duration of intervention, reliance on self-reported data, and a single school context reduce generalizability. Future research should include longitudinal, multi-site, and mixed-method studies to examine the long-term impact of behavioral intervention.



V. CONCLUSION

Evidence showed that the Inclusive Classroom Ambassador Program was able to positively impact students' willingness to participate in inclusive practices with peers having Special Needs and/or Disabilities, as evidenced by an increase in the students' behavioral intentions. Although changes in cognitive understanding or affective response were not statistically significant, they exhibited positive trends and an increase in consistency, thus leading to more time stable attitudes toward inclusion. Behavioral change can occur more quickly than cognitive or emotional changes and can be accomplished through means of structured peer-mediated programs. The Ambassador Program was successful in linking awareness and action, as it has created a more inclusive environment within the classroom.

Future research should examine longer implementation periods to allow for greater cognitive and effective changes to occur. In addition, implementing the program across a variety of educational settings would help to provide greater generalizability. The encouragement of implementing continuous reflective practices and cooperative learning strategies as well as reciprocal roles for students with special needs and/or disabilities throughout various educational settings will help to strengthen the outcomes of inclusion. In relation to the practical implications of the research, it is essential to institutionalize peer-led inclusive programs, provide ongoing support to teachers, and integrate inclusion across the overall educational setting to create lasting impact.

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