

Challenges and Reforms: Reframing Special Education in the Philippines Toward Inclusive Education

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges and reforms in special education in the Philippines, with particular focus on Laguna, as a basis for reframing special education toward a more inclusive, responsive, and systems-based educational framework. Anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the social model of disability, the study explored how policy directions, school conditions, stakeholder collaboration, teacher preparedness, and resource availability influence inclusive education implementation. A convergent parallel mixed-method design involved 30 SPED teachers, general education teachers, school heads, SPED coordinators, and parents or guardians from selected public and private schools in Laguna, with five key informants drawn from the same respondent group for the qualitative phase. Quantitative data were gathered through a researcher-made survey, while qualitative insights were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Findings showed that implementation challenges were perceived to a high extent, especially in learning resources and facilities, teacher preparedness and professional development, and service accessibility. Current reforms and practices were highly evident, but operationalization remained uneven across schools. Exploratory moderate positive relationships among challenges, reforms, and improvement opportunities indicated that policy visibility and implementation needs are interconnected, although the small, purposively bounded sample and correlational design do not establish causation or broad generalizability. Integrated findings supported a reframing framework centered on teacher capability, accessible resources, stakeholder collaboration, localized innovation, and policy-to-practice monitoring. Stronger institutional support, sustained training, assistive resources, and coordinated implementation mechanisms are recommended to advance inclusive special education in Laguna.

Keywords: *special education, inclusive education, learners with disabilities, teacher preparedness, policy implementation, Laguna*

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a major direction in contemporary educational reform as countries move away from deficit-based and segregated approaches to disability and toward rights-based, learner-centered, and support-oriented systems. Globally, inclusion is no longer understood as the mere placement of learners with disabilities in regular classrooms. Rather, it requires the removal of barriers in curriculum, instruction, assessment, school facilities, governance, and community participation so that all learners can access meaningful and equitable education (UNESCO, 2026; UNICEF, 2021). This shift positions inclusive education as both an educational responsibility and a social justice commitment.

In the Philippines, this direction has been strengthened by recent legal and policy reforms. Republic Act No. 11650 institutionalized the national policy of inclusion and services for learners with disabilities and mandated the establishment of support mechanisms such as Inclusive Learning Resource Centers. This was reinforced by DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021, which provided guidelines for educational programs and services for learners with disabilities in the K to 12 Basic Education Program, and DepEd Order No. 23, s. 2022, which established the Child Find Policy to improve the identification, location, and evaluation of learners with disabilities (Department of Education [DepEd], 2021, 2022; Republic Act No. 11650, 2022). These policies show that the country has already moved toward a more inclusive and rights-based framework for special education.

Despite these reforms, the implementation of special education in the country continues to face significant gaps. Recent reports indicate that many Filipino children with disabilities remain unreached or insufficiently supported by the education system. EDCOM 2 and IDinsight (2025) reported that only 391,089 learners with disabilities were enrolled in public schools in School Year 2024–2025, representing only about 8% of the estimated 5.1 million children with disabilities nationwide. The same report noted persistent concerns such as limited formal diagnosis, inadequate school-based support, lack of fully operational Inclusive Learning Resource Centers, and insufficient teacher training and tools. These conditions suggest that while national policies are already in place, their implementation at the school level remains uneven and incomplete.

This issue is particularly relevant in Laguna, where several public and private schools provide SPED-related services across areas such as Bay, Biñan, Cabuyao, Calamba, Paete, San Pablo, San Pedro, Santa Cruz, and Santa Rosa (National Council on Disability Affairs [NCDA], 2026). However, local evidence shows that SPED teachers in the province continue to experience persistent challenges, including limited learning resources, heavy workload, insufficient administrative support, lack of specialized personnel, and difficulty coordinating with parents and other support providers (Deliva et al., 2024). These realities indicate that Laguna has an existing foundation for inclusive and special education, but its implementation remains affected by resource, capacity, coordination, and policy-to-practice concerns.

Although previous studies have examined teacher preparedness, inclusive education implementation, and SPED-related challenges, there remains a need for a more integrated analysis of how special education may be reframed in light of current reforms and local implementation realities. Existing literature often discusses policies, teacher experiences, or resource limitations separately. However, fewer studies examine how these dimensions interact within a specific local context and how quantitative and qualitative findings may be integrated to develop a more responsive framework for inclusive special education. This gap is important because special education reform cannot be fully understood through policy review alone; it must also be examined through the lived experiences of stakeholders and the actual conditions of schools.

Thus, this study examined the challenges and reforms in special education in Laguna as a basis for reframing special education toward inclusive education. Specifically, it focused on stakeholder profiles, implementation challenges, current practices and reforms, and the convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings. By situating the study within both national policy directions and local school realities, the research aimed to generate evidence-based recommendations for strengthening teacher capability, improving access to resources and services, enhancing stakeholder collaboration, and supporting policy-to-practice alignment. The study is necessary because inclusive education can only become meaningful when legal commitments are translated into concrete, coordinated, and sustainable support systems for learners with disabilities.

Research Gap

Although inclusive education has already been supported by recent laws, policies, and institutional reforms in the Philippines, there remains a need to examine how these reforms are actually experienced and implemented at the school level. Existing studies have discussed issues such as teacher preparedness, availability of resources, administrative support, and stakeholder participation in special education. However, many of these studies tend to examine these concerns separately, either as policy issues, teacher-related concerns, or school-level implementation problems.

In the case of Laguna, available evidence shows that schools and teachers continue to experience challenges in providing inclusive and responsive services for learners with disabilities. However, there is still a need for a more focused and integrated inquiry that examines not only the challenges in SPED implementation, but also the current reforms and practices being carried out, the experiences of stakeholders, and the way quantitative and qualitative findings may be combined to develop a more grounded framework for improvement.

This study addresses this gap by examining special education in Laguna through a mixed-method approach. It focuses on the measurable extent of implementation challenges, the perceived status of current reforms and practices, the experiences of key stakeholders, and the

convergence of numerical and narrative findings. Through this approach, the study aims to generate a proposed reframing framework that may strengthen special education and support the continuing shift toward inclusive education.

2. Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to examine the challenges and reforms in the implementation of special education in Laguna as a basis for reframing special education toward a more inclusive, responsive, and systems-based educational framework.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of:
 - 1.1. stakeholder group;
 - 1.2. years of service or involvement;
 - 1.3. school type; and
 - 1.4. educational setting?
2. What is the extent of challenges encountered in the implementation of special education in Laguna in terms of:
 - 2.1. teacher preparedness and professional development;
 - 2.2. adequacy of learning resources and facilities;
 - 2.3. accessibility and inclusiveness of educational services;
 - 2.4. collaboration among schools, families, and communities;
 - 2.5. funding and administrative support; and
 - 2.6. implementation of special education policies and programs?
3. What is the perceived status of current reforms and practices in special education in Laguna in terms of:
 - 3.1. awareness of recent inclusive education policies;
 - 3.2. implementation of school-based accommodations and adaptations;
 - 3.3. use of Child Find and referral-related practices;
 - 3.4. administrative support for inclusive education initiatives;
 - 3.5. recognition of Republic Act No. 11650 as a legal basis for inclusion; and
 - 3.6. monitoring and guidance for implementation?

4. What are the experiences of stakeholders regarding the implementation of special education in Laguna?
5. How do the quantitative and qualitative findings converge in explaining the challenges, reforms, and implementation realities of special education in Laguna?
6. Based on the findings of the study, what reframing framework may be proposed to strengthen special education in Laguna toward inclusive education?

3. Literature Review

3.1. Global Discourses on Inclusive and Special Education.

Recent foreign literature indicates that global discourse on inclusive and special education has moved beyond a narrow placement-based understanding of disability toward a broader systems perspective that emphasizes equity, participation, accessibility, and learner support across the entire education system. UNESCO explains that inclusive education requires identifying and removing barriers across curricula, pedagogy, teaching, and school structures, while recognizing that every learner matters equally and that diversity should be treated as a normal feature of education rather than as an exception (UNESCO, 2020, 2026). This discourse frames inclusive education not as a marginal concern for a limited group of learners, but as a principle for restructuring education systems so that all learners can participate and achieve meaningfully (UNESCO, 2020, 2026).

A second major international strand is reflected in UNICEF's recent disability-inclusion literature, which presents inclusion as a matter of rights, participation, and evidence-informed intervention. UNICEF Innocenti (2025) emphasizes that effective inclusion requires reducing barriers across education and related systems rather than merely placing children with disabilities in regular classrooms. The same report also notes that although the global evidence base on inclusive interventions is growing, significant gaps remain, especially in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in areas such as family and community life, empowerment, and non-discrimination. This suggests that global discourse increasingly prioritizes intervention quality, measurable participation, and the strengthening of family and community support systems rather than symbolic inclusion alone (UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, 2025).

A third important foreign contribution comes from the OECD, which broadens inclusion beyond disability-specific provision toward a more comprehensive view of diversity, equity, and system reform. OECD literature argues that inclusion should be examined through multiple policy areas, including governance, resourcing, capacity building, school-level interventions, and monitoring and evaluation. It also notes that education systems conceptualize inclusion in different ways, such as support for students with disabilities, a response to exclusion more generally, and a principled orientation toward schooling for all. This broader framing is relevant to the Philippine context because it connects inclusive and special education to systemic reform

rather than to isolated classroom accommodations alone (Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023; OECD, 2023).

A fourth foreign discourse is advanced by the World Bank, which treats inclusive education as both a social justice and human-capital issue. The World Bank (2025) defines inclusive education as the creation of systems and environments that enable all students to have equal access to education and learning. It further stresses that exclusion remains particularly severe in many low- and middle-income contexts, reinforcing the need for system-level changes in infrastructure, financing, learning resources, and teacher support. This perspective is especially important for developing countries because it links inclusive education to broader issues of institutional capacity, poverty reduction, and national development (World Bank, 2025).

A fifth foreign line of literature highlights the need to finance and operationalize inclusion rather than merely endorse it rhetorically. Recent international policy materials argue that disability-inclusive education requires sustained investments in assistive technology, accessible learning environments, trained personnel, and support services. In effect, contemporary global discourse increasingly recognizes that inclusion cannot succeed when schools are expected to accommodate learner diversity without adequate institutional and financial support. This shift is important because it moves the discussion from moral commitment toward implementation feasibility and accountability (World Bank, 2025; Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023; UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, 2025).

In the Philippine context, recent local literature reflects a similar policy shift toward inclusion, while also revealing persistent implementation tensions. Republic Act No. 11650 institutionalized a policy of inclusion and services for learners with disabilities in support of inclusive education, signaling a stronger national commitment to rights-based access, support mechanisms, and reasonable accommodation. This law is significant because it formally reframes disability education from a purely segregated or center-based arrangement toward a more inclusive and service-oriented framework. As a result, Philippine special education discourse in recent years has become more closely aligned with international principles of inclusive education and learner rights (Republic of the Philippines, 2022).

This legal reform is complemented by recent DepEd policy issuances that operationalize inclusive education in basic education. DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021 provides policy guidelines on the provision of educational programs and services for learners with disabilities in the K to 12 Basic Education Program, while DepEd Order No. 23, s. 2022 establishes the Child Find Policy to improve the identification and educational access of learners with disabilities. Together, these issuances show that Philippine discourse is no longer limited to general advocacy; it now includes more concrete concerns such as screening, referral pathways, access, placement, and service delivery. At the same time, the existence of these policies implies that implementation barriers in identification, support services, and enrollment remain unresolved and continue to require close empirical examination (Department of Education [DepEd], 2021, 2022).

Recent local empirical studies also show that teacher preparedness remains one of the central concerns in inclusive and special education. In Valencia City Division, Villar and Marcia (2025) found that receiving teachers handling learners with special needs demonstrated varying levels of preparedness for inclusive classrooms, underscoring the continuing need for professional readiness among mainstream teachers. Likewise, other recent Philippine studies have shown that teachers continue to encounter difficulties in classroom management, instructional adaptation, and the practical translation of inclusive principles into day-to-day teaching. These findings are consistent with global literature that places teacher capacity at the center of inclusive reform (Villar & Marcia, 2025; Gabule & Baldonado, 2025).

Other local studies emphasize that implementation problems are not limited to teacher training alone but also involve resources, support systems, and school conditions. In Cebu, Obcial et al. (2025) found that inclusive education policies were generally implemented, but support services and access to specialized resources remained only moderate, with inadequate training, limited resources, inconsistent administrative support, and weak parental and community engagement emerging as key challenges. Similarly, Gabule and Baldonado (2025) reported that special education teachers in Iligan City strongly supported inclusive education yet continued to struggle with classroom management, time demands, and instructional adaptation. These studies suggest that Philippine discourse increasingly recognizes inclusion as a whole-school and whole-community concern rather than a teacher-only issue (Gabule & Baldonado, 2025; Obcial et al., 2025).

Finally, recent studies from Laguna and nearby Philippine divisions show why contextualized local research remains necessary despite national reforms. Deliva et al. (2024) documented the narratives of special education teachers in the first district of Laguna and highlighted the need for stronger support and inclusivity-focused interventions in San Pedro, Biñan, and Sta. Rosa. In the Division of San Pablo, Sanchez and Adajar (2025) found that teachers encountered significant challenges in implementing inclusive education for learners with special educational needs. Taken together, these studies indicate that although the Philippines has adopted inclusive education as a policy direction, actual school experiences remain shaped by uneven training, localized constraints, and context-specific realities. This creates a strong rationale for further mixed-method inquiry in Laguna, where global principles, national reforms, and local school conditions intersect (Deliva et al., 2024; Sanchez & Adajar, 2025).

The literature converges on a central proposition: inclusive and special education must be treated as a systemic, rights-based, and evidence-informed reform agenda rather than as the placement of learners with disabilities in regular classrooms. International sources emphasize governance, financing, monitoring, and multi-level support, while Philippine laws and DepEd policies establish a comparable rights-based direction. The persistent weakness lies in implementation fidelity. Local evidence continues to show gaps in teacher capability, specialized support, resources, referral systems, and context-responsive school practice. Accordingly, the present study examines not whether inclusion is recognized in policy, but how policy, school

capacity, stakeholder experience, and implementation conditions interact in Laguna (Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023; Republic of the Philippines, 2022; Deliva et al., 2024; Sanchez & Adajar, 2025).

3.2. Philippine Policy Reforms and Legal Foundations

Recent developments in Philippine special education and inclusive education show a clear shift from fragmented service provision toward a stronger rights-based and policy-driven framework. In the last five years, the Philippine government has advanced more explicit legal and administrative mechanisms intended to improve access, participation, and support for learners with disabilities. This reform trajectory reflects the country's effort to align educational practice with broader inclusive education principles by recognizing that learners with disabilities must be supported not only through specialized services but also through systemic institutional reforms (Department of Education [DepEd], 2021, 2022; Republic of the Philippines, 2022).

A major legal foundation of this reform agenda is Republic Act No. 11650, or the *Inclusive Education Act*, enacted in 2022. This law institutionalizes a policy of inclusion and services for learners with disabilities in support of inclusive education. It is a landmark reform because it moves Philippine special education beyond a limited or segregated framework and formally recognizes the rights of learners with disabilities to appropriate educational support, reasonable accommodation, and accessible learning environments. The law also provides for the establishment of Inclusive Learning Resource Centers and emphasizes the need for coordination among schools, local governments, and other stakeholders in delivering educational services. In this sense, RA 11650 serves as the core legal basis for reframing special education as an inclusive, rights-based, and support-oriented system (Republic of the Philippines, 2022).

Even before the passage of RA 11650, the Department of Education had already begun strengthening the administrative foundation for inclusive education through DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021. This policy provides guidelines on the provision of educational programs and services for learners with disabilities in the K to 12 basic education program. It is significant because it clarifies the range of educational placements, adaptations, interventions, and support services that may be provided to learners with disabilities. More importantly, it signals a transition from viewing special education as a separate track toward treating it as an integral component of the broader K to 12 system. Through this issuance, DepEd formally emphasized curricular adaptation, appropriate accommodations, and program responsiveness to learner diversity (DepEd, 2021).

Another important reform is DepEd Order No. 23, s. 2022, or the *Child Find Policy for Learners with Disabilities toward Inclusive Education*. This policy is critical because one of the longstanding barriers in special education has been the under-identification, delayed referral, and limited documentation of learners with disabilities. The Child Find Policy addresses this problem by articulating processes for identifying, locating, and screening learners with disabilities in order to facilitate timely provision of educational programs and services. The issuance also

reflects a preventive and systematized approach to inclusive education, recognizing that educational exclusion often begins when learners are not identified early and supported appropriately. Thus, the policy strengthens the legal and procedural foundation of inclusive education by linking access, screening, and service delivery more directly (DepEd, 2022).

More recently, the dissemination of the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of RA No. 11650 through Department Memorandum No. 043, s. 2025 indicates that the Philippine reform agenda is moving from legislative recognition toward operationalization. The IRR is particularly important because many educational laws remain limited in impact unless implementation structures, standards, and responsibilities are clarified. By circulating the IRR, DepEd reinforced the institutional mechanisms needed to translate the law into actual school-level practice. This development suggests that the policy environment for inclusive and special education in the Philippines is becoming more structured, with stronger attention to implementation, coordination, and compliance (DepEd, 2025).

Taken together, the recent reforms provide a substantially stronger legal and administrative foundation for inclusive education. Nevertheless, progressive policy language does not by itself establish accessible services, trained personnel, functioning referral pathways, or consistent accommodations. Effectiveness depends on whether responsibilities, resources, monitoring routines, and technical support are translated into school-level action. Examining Laguna is therefore necessary to determine where policy intent is being operationalized, where implementation remains constrained, and what institutional supports are required to close the policy-to-practice gap (DepEd, 2021, 2022, 2025; Republic of the Philippines, 2022).

3.3. Persistent Challenges in Special Education Implementation

Recent international and local literature consistently shows that, despite stronger policy support for inclusive and special education, implementation remains hindered by persistent structural, institutional, and classroom-level barriers. Globally, inclusive education continues to face difficulties related to governance, resourcing, capacity building, school-level intervention, and monitoring. OECD literature emphasizes that these challenges are interconnected, meaning that weaknesses in one area, such as resourcing or staff development, can undermine the effectiveness of the entire inclusion agenda (Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023; OECD, 2023). UNESCO likewise maintains that inclusive education requires the removal of barriers across curricula, pedagogy, teaching, and school systems, indicating that the challenge is not limited to learner placement but extends to the broader educational environment (UNESCO, 2020, 2026).

One of the most persistent challenges is teacher preparedness and professional support. Foreign and local literature alike point to the difficulty of implementing inclusive education when teachers are expected to address diverse learner needs without sufficient training, continuing professional development, or access to specialist guidance. In the Philippines, recent studies have shown that teachers continue to struggle with inclusive classroom management,

differentiated instruction, and the adaptation of teaching methods for learners with special educational needs. A 2025 study in the Division of San Pablo found that junior and senior high school teachers encountered substantial challenges in implementing inclusive education for learners with special educational needs, while a 2025 Iligan City study similarly identified classroom management, time management, and instructional adaptation as recurring concerns among teachers (Sanchez & Adajar, 2025; Gabule & Baldonado, 2025).

Another major challenge involves the inadequacy of resources, facilities, and support services. International literature notes that inclusion cannot be sustained when schools lack accessible infrastructure, learning materials, assistive devices, or specialized personnel. OECD and UNESCO sources both suggest that the practical realization of inclusive education depends heavily on the presence of coordinated support systems and measurable implementation tools (Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). In the Philippine context, the continuing dissemination of the implementing rules and regulations of Republic Act No. 11650 reflects the need to strengthen the operational structures that support learners with disabilities, including inclusive learning resource centers and related services (Department of Education [DepEd], 2025). These policy developments imply that resource and service gaps remain significant enough to require sustained system-level intervention (DepEd, 2025).

A further challenge lies in policy-to-practice inconsistency. Although many education systems, including the Philippines, have adopted progressive inclusive education policies, implementation on the ground often remains uneven. OECD literature notes that countries still struggle with contextually appropriate indicators and monitoring mechanisms to assess whether inclusion goals are actually being achieved (Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023). Similarly, recent Philippine studies report that inclusive education efforts are often constrained by inadequate infrastructure, inconsistent policy implementation, and uneven school readiness. For instance, a 2025 Philippine study on inclusive education implementation found that inadequate infrastructure, teacher biases, lack of awareness, and inconsistent policies remained substantial barriers even where implementation efforts were already underway (Obcial et al., 2025).

Stakeholder coordination also remains a persistent challenge. Inclusive and special education require collaboration among teachers, school leaders, families, health professionals, and community agencies, yet this coordination is often weak or fragmented. DepEd's Child Find Policy itself recognizes the necessity of organized identification, referral, and support systems for learners with disabilities, which suggests that gaps in coordination continue to affect educational access and service delivery (DepEd, 2022). In local realities, especially in provincial settings, differences in institutional capacity, family engagement, and inter-agency support may intensify these implementation problems. Thus, stakeholder collaboration remains both a need and a continuing challenge in special education practice (DepEd, 2022; OECD, 2023).

Overall, implementation barriers are mutually reinforcing. Limited training weakens instructional adaptation; inadequate resources restrict accommodations; fragmented referral systems delay support; and inconsistent monitoring permits wide differences among schools.

These are not isolated technical deficiencies but indicators of institutional capacity and implementation fidelity. A localized examination in Laguna is therefore needed to identify how leadership, resources, professional support, collaboration, and policy execution combine to enable or constrain inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020; Sanchez & Adajar, 2025; Gabule & Baldonado, 2025).

3.4. Stakeholder Experiences, Collaboration, and Local Realities

Recent literature emphasizes that stakeholder experiences are central to understanding how inclusive and special education is implemented in actual school settings. Contemporary discourse no longer views inclusion as a matter of policy compliance alone; rather, it recognizes that the success of inclusive education depends on how teachers, school leaders, parents, support personnel, and communities experience, interpret, and carry out inclusive practices in their local contexts. International reports have likewise highlighted that leadership, participation, and shared accountability are necessary conditions for improving educational inclusion and school responsiveness (UNESCO, 2020, 2026).

Foreign studies further show that collaboration among stakeholders is a decisive factor in the success of inclusive education. In a qualitative case study conducted in Jamaica, Anderson Leachman (2023) found that non-teaching stakeholders, including school leaders and support personnel, viewed inclusive education as highly dependent on coordination, institutional commitment, and available resources. This finding is important because it expands the discussion beyond teachers and shows that inclusion is a shared institutional responsibility. Similarly, Mokhampanyane (2024), in a South African study, argued that teachers' capability to implement inclusive education is closely tied to the support structures surrounding them, suggesting that stakeholder collaboration is necessary for translating inclusive ideals into practice. Mavi et al. (2025) also underscored the importance of family participation in special education, showing that teachers consider parental contribution essential in addressing learners' needs and sustaining support across school and home environments.

Another recurring theme in foreign literature is the importance of local realities in shaping how inclusion is practiced. Even when countries adopt inclusive education policies, implementation often remains uneven because schools operate within varying cultural, social, financial, and institutional conditions. Recent studies on digital inclusion and stakeholder participation show that barriers such as inadequate access to technology, weak support systems, limited training, and insufficient local coordination continue to affect learners with disabilities in many settings (Mezzanotte & Calvel, 2023; UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, 2025). These findings suggest that inclusive education must always be interpreted in relation to local realities rather than discussed only at the level of abstract policy ideals.

In the Philippine context, recent studies similarly show that stakeholder awareness and collaboration strongly influence inclusive education outcomes. Capillo and Naanep (2025) found

that stakeholders' awareness and attitudes toward inclusive education in selected elementary schools in West Isulan District were significant to the mainstreaming of learners with diverse needs. Their study suggests that inclusion is not merely a technical matter of placing learners in regular classrooms but also a social process shaped by how families, teachers, and communities understand and support inclusive education. In another Philippine study, Taghap and Pabalan (2025) reported that administrators emphasized strong stakeholder collaboration as essential to the success of inclusive education initiatives, highlighting coordination and shared responsibility as practical requirements for implementation.

Local Philippine literature also reveals that stakeholder experiences are shaped by local constraints and contextual conditions. Research on inclusive education in Philippine schools continues to report issues such as limited training, insufficient policy clarity, inadequate material support, and uneven community participation. Recent studies on school leadership and stakeholder roles further suggest that effective implementation depends not only on national directives but also on how school heads organize participation, clarify responsibilities, and build cooperative relationships within their communities (Maturan, 2025). In Laguna, this is particularly relevant because local educational realities may vary across schools in terms of access to services, leadership support, teacher preparedness, and family engagement. Thus, stakeholder experiences in Laguna must be examined not only as individual perceptions but also as reflections of broader local conditions affecting special education practice.

The literature consequently positions stakeholder experience, collaboration, and local context as inseparable dimensions of inclusion. International evidence shows that implementation depends on coordinated support surrounding teachers and learners, while Philippine studies demonstrate that awareness, leadership, family participation, and school capacity shape whether policies become routine practice. These findings justify the present multi-stakeholder inquiry and its focus on the interaction of policy, collaboration, and local educational conditions in Laguna (UNESCO, 2020; Capillo & Naanep, 2025; Anderson Leachman, 2023).

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the social model of disability. These two perspectives provide a strong foundation for examining special education not merely as a classroom concern, but as a broader educational, institutional, and social issue shaped by interacting systems, policies, practices, and stakeholder experiences.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains that learner development is influenced by different layers of the environment. In the context of special education, the learner is affected not only by personal learning needs but also by the quality of classroom instruction, teacher preparedness, family support, school leadership, community involvement, and national education policies. The microsystem includes the learner's immediate environment, such as

teachers, parents, classmates, and school personnel. The mesosystem refers to the relationships among these immediate groups, particularly the collaboration between schools, families, and communities. The exosystem includes structures that indirectly affect the learner, such as funding, administrative support, availability of specialists, and access to learning resources. The macrosystem includes national laws, cultural beliefs, institutional priorities, and inclusive education policies such as Republic Act No. 11650, DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021, and DepEd Order No. 23, s. 2022. Through this theory, the study views the challenges and reforms in special education as products of interacting systems rather than isolated problems within the learner or teacher alone.

The social model of disability further supports the study by shifting attention away from the learner's disability as the main problem and focusing instead on the barriers that limit participation and learning. From this perspective, learners with disabilities experience exclusion not simply because of impairment, but because of inaccessible facilities, insufficient learning materials, limited teacher training, weak referral systems, negative attitudes, inadequate accommodations, and inconsistent policy implementation. This model is directly connected to the variables of the study because the research examines barriers in teacher preparedness, resources and facilities, accessibility, collaboration, funding, administrative support, and policy implementation. It also supports the need to examine current reforms and practices that aim to reduce these barriers and promote more inclusive educational participation.

Together, these theories guide the study in analyzing how special education in Laguna may be reframed toward inclusive education. Bronfenbrenner's theory explains the multi-level influences affecting implementation, while the social model of disability explains why barriers must be addressed at the institutional and environmental levels. Therefore, this study does not treat special education as a separate or remedial service only. Instead, it views special education as part of a larger inclusive system that requires coordinated support from teachers, school heads, families, communities, local education offices, and policy implementers.

5. Conceptual Framework

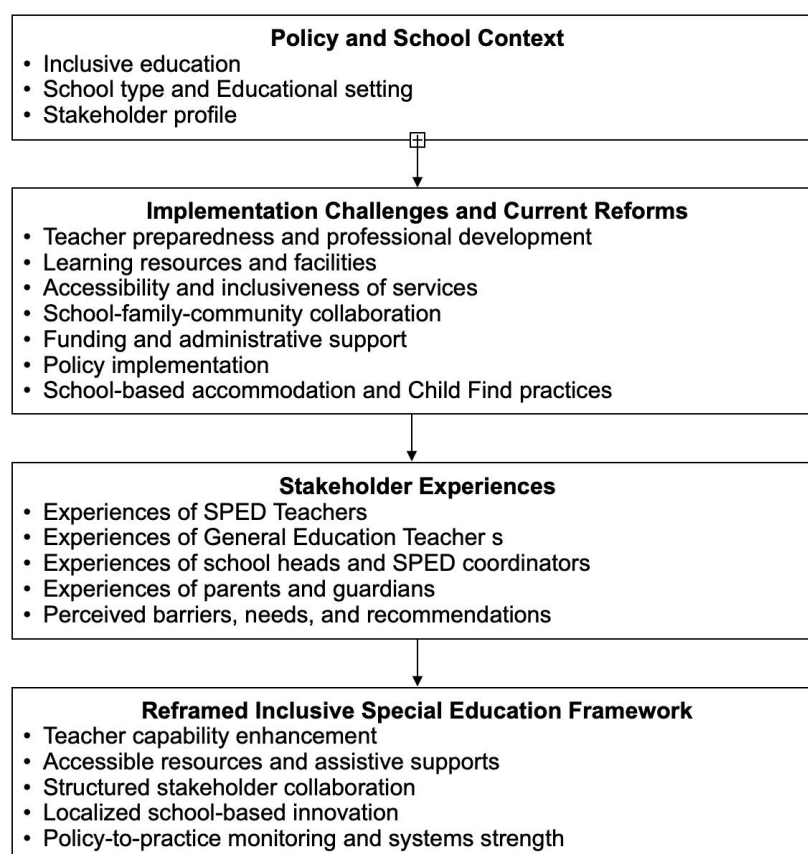


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the study follows the flow: Policy and School Context → Implementation Challenges and Current Reforms → Stakeholder Experiences → Reframed Inclusive Special Education Framework.

The first component, policy and school context, refers to the legal, institutional, and local conditions that shape special education implementation in Laguna. This includes national laws and DepEd policies on inclusive education, school type, educational setting, available support systems, and the profile of stakeholders involved in special education.

The second component focuses on implementation challenges and current reforms. Implementation challenges include teacher preparedness and professional development, adequacy of learning resources and facilities, accessibility and inclusiveness of educational services, collaboration among schools, families, and communities, funding and administrative support, and implementation of special education policies and programs. Current reforms and practices include awareness of inclusive education policies, school-based accommodations and adaptations, Child Find and referral-related practices, administrative support, recognition of Republic Act No. 11650, and monitoring and guidance for implementation.

The third component is stakeholder experiences, which provides the qualitative dimension of the study. This includes the actual experiences, perceptions, concerns, and recommendations of SPED teachers, general education teachers, school heads, SPED coordinators, and parents or guardians. These experiences help explain the numerical findings and provide a deeper understanding of how special education policies and reforms are experienced in actual school settings.

The final component is the reframed inclusive special education framework. This is the expected output of the study and serves as a proposed guide for strengthening special education in Laguna. The framework is expected to emphasize teacher capability enhancement, accessible resources and assistive supports, stakeholder collaboration, localized school-based innovation, and policy-to-practice monitoring.

In this study, policy and school context refers to the external and institutional conditions that influence how special education is implemented. This includes the presence of inclusive education policies, the type of school, the educational setting, and the roles of different stakeholders involved in supporting learners with disabilities.

Implementation challenges refer to the difficulties encountered in carrying out special education programs and inclusive practices. These are measured in terms of teacher preparedness, resources and facilities, accessibility of services, collaboration, funding and administrative support, and policy implementation.

Current reforms and practices refer to the existing actions, policies, and school-based initiatives intended to improve special education. These include awareness of inclusive education policies, implementation of accommodations and adaptations, use of Child Find and referral practices, administrative support, recognition of Republic Act No. 11650, and monitoring of inclusive education implementation.

Stakeholder experiences refer to the lived experiences, observations, and insights of individuals directly involved in special education. These include teachers, school heads, SPED coordinators, and parents or guardians. Their experiences are important because they provide practical explanations for the quantitative findings and reveal the actual conditions behind the numerical results.

Reframed inclusive special education framework refers to the proposed output of the study. It is developed from the combined quantitative and qualitative findings and is intended to provide a more responsive guide for improving special education in Laguna. This framework highlights the need for stronger teacher training, adequate resources, improved accessibility, better coordination among stakeholders, localized school planning, and stronger monitoring of inclusive education policies.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Design.

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-method research design. This design was used because the study required both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the challenges and reforms in the implementation of special education in Laguna. The quantitative strand measured the extent of challenges and the perceived status of current reforms and practices, while the qualitative strand explored the experiences, concerns, and recommendations of stakeholders directly involved in special and inclusive education.

In this design, the quantitative and qualitative data were gathered within the same phase of the study, analyzed separately, and integrated during the interpretation of findings. The quantitative results provided measurable patterns, while the qualitative findings supplied explanations and contextual insights. The integration of both strands allowed the study to develop a more comprehensive basis for proposing a reframed inclusive special education framework for Laguna.

For the quantitative component, the study used a descriptive and exploratory correlational approach. It described respondent profile, implementation challenges, current reforms and practices, and opportunities for strengthening special education, and explored relationships among the composite scores. Because only 30 accessible respondents participated, the correlations were interpreted as context-specific rather than province-wide evidence. For the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews gathered stakeholder experiences, barriers, and recommendations.

5.2. Participants of the Study.

The study was conducted in selected public and private schools in Laguna, Region IV-A CALABARZON, Philippines. Laguna was selected as the locale of the study because it has various schools and institutions that provide SPED-related and inclusive education services, while also reflecting different educational settings such as urban, peri-urban, and semi-rural communities.

The quantitative respondents were 30 eligible and available stakeholders directly involved in special or inclusive education: 8 SPED teachers, 9 general education teachers, 4 school heads or administrators, 4 SPED coordinators, and 5 parents or guardians. As these 30 stakeholders constituted the accessible population during data gathering, all eligible and consenting members were included to maximize the available evidence and retain representation across the five stakeholder groups.

For the qualitative component, five key informants were purposively drawn from the same 30 respondents, with one representative from each stakeholder group. They were selected for their direct experience in implementing, managing, supporting, or observing special and

inclusive education in Laguna. Thus, the study retained 30 unique participants while obtaining qualitative explanations for the survey patterns.

5.3 Sampling Procedure.

The study used total enumeration for the quantitative phase because the accessible population consisted of only 30 eligible and available stakeholders. All qualified and consenting members were included, avoiding the exclusion of participants from a small population and retaining representation of SPED teachers, general education teachers, school heads or administrators, SPED coordinators, and parents or guardians. The findings therefore describe the participating stakeholders and schools and are not province-wide prevalence estimates.

For the qualitative phase, criterion-based purposive sampling selected five key informants from the 30 survey respondents. One participant represented each stakeholder category and was chosen based on direct experience, willingness to be interviewed, and ability to provide detailed information on implementation challenges, reforms, collaboration, and recommendations. The interviews supplied explanatory depth but were not treated as statistically representative of all Laguna stakeholders.

5.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

The study included respondents who met the following criteria:

1. They were directly involved in special education or inclusive education in Laguna.
2. They belonged to any of the identified stakeholder groups: SPED teachers, general education teachers, school heads or administrators, SPED coordinators, or parents or guardians of learners with disabilities.
3. They had sufficient knowledge or experience regarding the implementation of special education or inclusive education programs.
4. They voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

The study excluded individuals who were not directly involved in special or inclusive education, respondents outside Laguna, individuals who did not provide consent, and participants who were unable to complete the survey or interview process.

5.5 Research Instruments.

The study used two researcher-made instruments: a survey questionnaire for the quantitative strand and a semi-structured interview guide for the qualitative strand. Both instruments were developed from the statement of the problem, theoretical and conceptual

frameworks, and recent literature on special and inclusive education. They were designed to measure implementation challenges, determine the status of current reforms and practices, identify priority opportunities for systems strengthening, and document stakeholder experiences in Laguna.

The survey questionnaire contained four parts. Part I gathered the respondents' stakeholder group, years of service or involvement, school type, and educational setting. Part II measured implementation challenges in teacher preparedness and professional development, resources and facilities, accessibility of services, school-family-community collaboration, funding and administrative support, and policy implementation. Part III assessed current reforms and practices, including policy awareness, accommodations and adaptations, Child Find and referral practices, administrative support, recognition of Republic Act No. 11650, and implementation monitoring. Part IV identified priority opportunities for strengthening special education through teacher coaching, assistive technology and adapted materials, collaboration, localized inclusion planning, clearer referral mechanisms, and technical assistance.

The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale to determine the degree of agreement or perception of the respondents regarding each item. The scale ranged from 5 to 1, with corresponding verbal interpretations. A mean score of 4.21–5.00 was interpreted as very high extent or very highly evident; 3.41–4.20 as high extent or highly evident; 2.61–3.40 as moderate extent or moderately evident; 1.81–2.60 as low extent or less evident; and 1.00–1.80 as very low extent or not evident. This scale allowed the researcher to quantify the respondents' perceptions and determine the overall level of challenges and reforms in special education implementation.

For the qualitative phase, the study used a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses from selected key informants regarding their experiences, concerns, observed barriers, existing practices, support mechanisms, and recommendations for strengthening special education in Laguna. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask the same core questions to all participants while also allowing follow-up questions for clarification and deeper explanation. Through this instrument, the researcher was able to gather narrative data that complemented and explained the quantitative findings.

Both instruments underwent expert validation before administration. Validators reviewed content, clarity, relevance, organization, and alignment with the study objectives, and revisions were made accordingly. The survey questionnaire was also subjected to pilot reliability assessment using Cronbach's alpha for each quantitative scale. Expert review strengthened content validity, while internal consistency was to be documented only through verified scale-specific coefficients from the original pilot-test output.

5.6 Validation and Reliability of the Instruments.

The research instruments were subjected to validation to ensure their content relevance, clarity, appropriateness, and alignment with the objectives of the study. The survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide were presented to experts in special education, inclusive education, educational management, and research for review and evaluation. The validators examined whether the items were suitable for the target respondents, whether the indicators reflected the variables of the study, and whether the wording of the questions was clear, objective, and free from ambiguity. Their comments and recommendations were carefully considered, and necessary revisions were made to improve the organization, language, and content of the instruments.

After expert validation, the revised questionnaire was pilot-tested with respondents who had characteristics comparable to those of the target participants but were excluded from the final sample. Pilot testing examined item clarity, response consistency, and the functioning of the three quantitative scales: implementation challenges, current reforms and practices, and opportunities for strengthening special education. Internal consistency was evaluated through Cronbach's alpha for each scale rather than through a single undifferentiated coefficient.

A Cronbach's alpha of .70 or higher was established as the criterion for acceptable internal consistency. However, the original pilot-test output and verified scale-specific coefficients were not included in the files available for revision; therefore, no values were invented. Before journal submission, the researcher must retrieve the pilot output and report the coefficients for implementation challenges, current reforms and practices, and opportunities for strengthening special education. If the output cannot be recovered, the questionnaire must be re-pilot-tested with comparable respondents outside the final 30 and the three coefficients recomputed. This preserves methodological transparency and prevents unsupported reliability reporting.

5.7 Data Gathering Procedure.

The data gathering procedure was conducted in an organized and ethical manner to ensure the proper collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Before the actual conduct of the study, the researcher secured the necessary permission from the concerned school authorities and other relevant offices in the selected schools in Laguna. After approval was granted, the researcher coordinated with the school heads, SPED coordinators, and other authorized personnel regarding the schedule, process, and participants of the study. The purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of all responses were clearly explained to the respondents before the administration of the instruments.

For the quantitative phase, the researcher administered the validated questionnaire to all 30 eligible and consenting respondents composed of SPED teachers, general education teachers, school heads or administrators, SPED coordinators, and parents or guardians. Respondents

received sufficient time and reasonable follow-up while participation remained voluntary. Retrieved questionnaires were checked for completeness, organized by variable, encoded, and prepared for statistical treatment. Only complete responses were analyzed, and all frequencies and percentages were based on the 30 valid questionnaires.

For the qualitative phase, five key informants selected from the 30 respondents participated in semi-structured interviews, with one representative from each stakeholder category. Informed consent and permission for note-taking or audio recording were secured before each interview. Sessions followed the prepared guide, and follow-up probes clarified participants' experiences, barriers, current practices, support mechanisms, and recommendations for strengthening special education.

The interview responses were documented through note-taking and, when permitted by the participants, audio recording. After the interviews, the responses were transcribed, reviewed, coded, and organized according to emerging themes. The quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately and were later integrated during the interpretation of findings. This integration allowed the researcher to compare the numerical results with the narrative responses of the participants and determine how both sets of findings converged in explaining the challenges and reforms in special education implementation in Laguna.

5.8 Data Analysis.

The data were analyzed through quantitative and qualitative procedures consistent with the convergent parallel mixed-method design and the final group of 30 respondents. Completed questionnaires were encoded, checked, and tabulated according to the research questions. Frequency and percentage described stakeholder group, years of service or involvement, school type, and educational setting. Because the participants comprised the accessible population rather than a probability sample of all Laguna stakeholders, descriptive results were interpreted only within the participating respondents and schools.

Weighted mean and standard deviation were used to determine the extent of challenges encountered in the implementation of special education and the perceived status of current reforms and practices. The weighted mean was used to identify the general level of perception of the respondents for each indicator, while the standard deviation was used to determine the consistency or variability of their responses. The results were interpreted using the established five-point scale presented in the research instrument section.

Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine relationships among composite scores for implementation challenges, current reforms and practices, and strengthening opportunities. Data completeness, linearity, influential outliers, and the suitability of composite Likert scores were considered before interpretation. Exact two-tailed p-values were evaluated at .05, with coefficient magnitude and shared variance emphasized. Because only 30 non-randomly identified respondents participated, the correlations were treated as non-causal,

context-specific associations. Group-comparison tests were not emphasized because some stakeholder subgroups contained only four or five respondents.

For the qualitative phase, the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The interview responses were transcribed, reviewed, and coded to identify recurring ideas, patterns, and meanings. Similar codes were grouped into categories, and broader themes were developed based on the participants' responses. These themes focused on stakeholder experiences, implementation barriers, current practices, support mechanisms, and recommendations for strengthening special education in Laguna.

After separate analyses, the quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated through a mixed-methods. Survey statistics were aligned with themes and coded excerpts to identify convergence, complementarity, or divergence. This procedure moved integration beyond parallel reporting by generating meta-inferences about why policy awareness, implementation barriers, and reform opportunities occurred together. The resulting integrated interpretation served as the basis for the proposed reframing framework for special education in Laguna.

5.9 Data Sources.

The study used primary and secondary data. Primary data came from the completed surveys of the 30 stakeholders constituting the accessible population and from interviews with five key informants selected from the same group. Participants included SPED teachers, general education teachers, school heads or administrators, SPED coordinators, and parents or guardians. Their responses provided context-specific information on experiences, perceptions, concerns, and recommendations. Because the qualitative subsample was embedded within the survey group, the study involved 30 unique participants in total.

The secondary sources of data came from relevant laws, DepEd issuances, research articles, policy briefs, institutional reports, and other published materials related to special education, inclusive education, learners with disabilities, teacher preparedness, stakeholder collaboration, and policy implementation. These sources were used to support the background of the study, strengthen the review of related literature, and provide a policy and theoretical basis for interpreting the findings. The use of both primary and secondary sources allowed the study to connect actual stakeholder experiences with existing policies, literature, and reform directions in inclusive education.

5.10 Ethical Considerations.

The study observed ethical standards throughout the entire research process to protect the rights, dignity, privacy, and welfare of all respondents and participants. Before the conduct of the

study, the researcher secured the necessary approval from the concerned school authorities and properly informed the participants about the purpose of the research, the nature of their participation, and the procedures involved in data gathering. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary, and no respondent or participant was forced to answer the questionnaire or take part in the interview.

Informed consent was obtained from all respondents and key informants before they participated in the study. They were informed that they had the right to refuse participation, skip any question that made them uncomfortable, or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. For parent or guardian participants, the purpose and scope of the study were explained clearly to ensure that their participation was based on full understanding and voluntary agreement.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. The names of the respondents, key informants, learners, schools, and other identifying information were not disclosed in the presentation and discussion of findings. Codes or general descriptions were used instead of real names to protect the identity of the participants. All survey responses, interview notes, transcripts, and encoded data were kept secure and were used only for academic and research purposes.

Since the study involved issues related to learners with disabilities and special education, the researcher ensured the use of respectful, inclusive, and non-stigmatizing language throughout the research process. The study avoided any question, procedure, or interpretation that could harm, discriminate against, or negatively label learners with disabilities, their families, teachers, or schools. The findings were presented objectively and responsibly, with the intention of improving special education implementation rather than assigning blame to any individual or institution.

The researcher also ensured honesty and integrity in the collection, analysis, and reporting of data. The responses of the participants were presented truthfully, and the results were interpreted based on the gathered data. Proper acknowledgment of secondary sources was observed to avoid plagiarism and to uphold academic integrity. Through these ethical measures, the study-maintained respect for participants and ensured that the research was conducted in a responsible and professionally acceptable manner.

6. Results and Discussion

This section presents findings based on 30 eligible respondents and five key informants drawn from the same group. Results cover respondent profile, implementation challenges, current reforms and practices, strengthening opportunities, exploratory relationships, stakeholder experiences, and mixed-methods integration. Descriptive statistics show conditions perceived by the participating stakeholders, while interview evidence explains their practical meaning. Because the study involved a small accessible population, findings are interpreted as evidence from the participating schools rather than province-wide estimates.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Stakeholder Group	SPED Teacher	8	26.67
	General Education Teacher	9	30.00
	School Head/Administrator	4	13.33
	SPED Coordinator	4	13.33
	Parent/Guardian	5	16.67
Years of Service/Involvement	1-5 years	7	23.33
	6-10 years	9	30.00
	11-15 years	6	20.00
	16 years and above	8	26.67
School Type	Public	22	73.33
	Private	8	26.67
Educational Setting	Urban	12	40.00
	Peri-urban	10	33.33
	Semi-rural	8	26.67
Total		30	100.00

Table 1 shows 30 respondents from the principal stakeholder groups. General education teachers formed the largest group with 9 or 30.00%, followed by 8 SPED teachers or 26.67%.

Parents or guardians numbered 5 or 16.67%, while school heads or administrators and SPED coordinators each numbered 4 or 13.33%. The distribution included both classroom implementers and school-community stakeholders, but it represents the revised accessible respondent group rather than the population distribution across Laguna.

For years of service or involvement, 9 respondents or 30.00% had 6–10 years, 8 or 26.67% had 16 years and above, 7 or 23.33% had 1–5 years, and 6 or 20.00% had 11–15 years. Public-school respondents numbered 22 or 73.33%, compared with 8 or 26.67% from private schools. By educational setting, 12 or 40.00% were urban, 10 or 33.33% peri-urban, and 8 or 26.67% semi-rural.

The profile supports the mixed and multi-stakeholder nature of the study while also clarifying the limits of the evidence. Teachers constituted 17 of the 30 respondents and therefore provided strong classroom-level insight regarding accommodations, instructional adjustments, and learner support strategies. The participation of parents, school heads, and SPED coordinators added family, leadership, and program-management perspectives. Nevertheless, the small number within each subgroup means that comparisons among stakeholder categories should be treated cautiously. The profile is most useful for contextualizing the integrated findings and demonstrating that special education is a shared institutional and community responsibility rather than only a classroom concern.

Table 2

Extent of Perceived Challenges in Special Education Implementation

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Teacher preparedness and professional development	4.24	Very High Extent	2
Adequacy of learning resources and facilities	4.38	Very High Extent	1
Accessibility and inclusiveness of educational services	4.18	High Extent	3
Collaboration among schools, families, and communities	3.96	High Extent	5

Funding and administrative support	4.07	High Extent	4
Implementation of special education policies and programs	3.91	High Extent	6
Overall Mean	4.12	High Extent	

Table 2 presents the extent of perceived challenges in the implementation of special education in Laguna. The overall mean of 4.12 indicates that the respondents perceived the challenges to a high extent. This means that although special education and inclusive education policies are already present, schools continue to experience serious implementation concerns that affect the delivery of appropriate support services for learners with disabilities.

The highest-rated challenge was the adequacy of learning resources and facilities, with a weighted mean of 4.38, interpreted as very high extent. This shows that respondents considered the lack of appropriate learning materials, assistive devices, accessible classrooms, and specialized facilities as the most serious concern in special education implementation. The result suggests that policy implementation becomes difficult when schools do not have sufficient materials and physical support systems needed by learners with disabilities.

Teacher preparedness and professional development ranked second, with a weighted mean of 4.24, also interpreted as very high extent. This indicates that respondents recognized the need for more training, coaching, and capacity-building programs for both SPED teachers and general education teachers handling inclusive classrooms. Although teachers may be willing to support learners with disabilities, their effectiveness is limited when they do not receive continuous training on differentiated instruction, behavior support, assessment accommodation, and inclusive classroom management.

Accessibility and inclusiveness of educational services ranked third, with a weighted mean of 4.18. This means that respondents still observed barriers in ensuring that learners with disabilities can fully access educational programs and participate meaningfully in school activities. These barriers may include limited referral services, difficulty accessing diagnostic support, lack of individualized support, and inconsistent implementation of inclusive classroom practices.

Funding and administrative support, collaboration among schools, families, and communities, and implementation of special education policies and programs were also rated to a high extent. Although these indicators ranked lower than resources and teacher preparedness, they still reflect important implementation issues. The results suggest that special education in Laguna requires not only teacher training and materials but also stronger leadership, improved funding, clearer coordination, and more consistent policy monitoring.

Overall, the findings show that the challenges in special education implementation are systemic. They are not limited to teachers alone but are connected to facilities, resources, leadership, family participation, funding, and policy execution. This supports the view that inclusive education requires coordinated institutional support rather than isolated classroom-level effort.

Table 3
Perceived Status of Current Reforms and Practices in Special Education

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Awareness of recent inclusive education policies	4.05	Highly Evident	2
Implementation of school-based accommodations and adaptations	3.82	Highly Evident	4
Use of Child Find and referral-related practices	3.79	Highly Evident	5
Administrative support for inclusive education initiatives	3.74	Highly Evident	6
Recognition of RA 11650 as a legal basis for inclusion	4.12	Highly Evident	1
Monitoring and guidance for implementation	3.88	Highly Evident	3
Overall Mean	3.90	Highly Evident	

Table 3 shows that the perceived status of current reforms and practices in special education was highly evident, as shown by the overall mean of 3.90. This indicates that respondents recognized the presence of inclusive education reforms in schools, particularly in terms of policy awareness, legal recognition, monitoring, and school-level practices. However, the scores also show that these reforms have not yet reached the highest level of implementation.

The highest-rated indicator was recognition of Republic Act No. 11650 as a legal basis for inclusion, with a weighted mean of 4.12. This suggests that stakeholders were aware of the legal foundation of inclusive education and recognized its importance in supporting learners with disabilities. Awareness of recent inclusive education policies also obtained a high rating, with a weighted mean of 4.05. These findings show that national policies have reached the level of school awareness and stakeholder recognition.

However, the lower-ranked indicators reveal areas where implementation remains weaker. Administrative support for inclusive education initiatives obtained the lowest weighted mean of 3.74, while the use of Child Find and referral-related practices obtained a weighted mean of 3.79. These results suggest that although policies are known, operational mechanisms such as referral systems, administrative follow-through, technical assistance, and school-based implementation support remain inconsistent.

The findings reveal an important policy-to-practice gap. The reforms are visible, but their full implementation remains uneven. This means that the presence of policies alone does not automatically result in effective inclusive education. Schools need stronger mechanisms for translating laws and DepEd issuances into actual classroom practices, referral procedures, monitoring systems, and learner support services.

Table 4

Opportunities for Strengthening Special Education in Laguna

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Sustained teacher training and coaching on inclusive education	4.45	Very High Extent	1
Provision of assistive technology and adapted learning materials	4.39	Very High Extent	2
Strengthening school-family-community collaboration	4.32	Very High Extent	3
Development of localized school-based inclusion plans	4.27	Very High Extent	4

Establishment of clearer referral and Child Find mechanisms	4.24	Very High Extent	5
Regular monitoring and technical assistance for policy implementation	4.19	High Extent	6
Overall Mean	4.31	Very High Extent	

Table 4 presents the opportunities for strengthening special education in Laguna. The overall mean of 4.31 indicates that the respondents perceived these opportunities to a very high extent. This means that despite the implementation challenges identified in Table 2, stakeholders also saw strong possibilities for improving special education through practical and systems-based interventions.

The highest-rated opportunity was sustained teacher training and coaching on inclusive education, with a weighted mean of 4.45. This finding confirms that teacher capability remains one of the most urgent areas for improvement. Respondents recognized that training should not be limited to one-time seminars but should involve continuing professional development, coaching, mentoring, and school-based learning sessions. This is important because inclusive education requires teachers to adapt instruction, modify assessment, manage diverse learning needs, and collaborate with families and specialists.

The second highest-rated opportunity was the provision of assistive technology and adapted learning materials, with a weighted mean of 4.39. This result directly corresponds to the highest-rated challenge in Table 2, which was the inadequacy of learning resources and facilities. The alignment between the challenge and opportunity suggests that stakeholders clearly identified the need for concrete material support, including assistive devices, accessible learning resources, visual aids, adapted modules, and inclusive classroom equipment.

Strengthening school-family-community collaboration also received a very high rating, with a weighted mean of 4.32. This indicates that respondents viewed collaboration as a key mechanism for improving learner support. Since learners with disabilities require consistent assistance across home, school, and community settings, stronger coordination among teachers, parents, school heads, and support providers can help ensure continuity of intervention and monitoring.

The findings from this table suggest that stakeholders do not view the situation as hopeless. Instead, they see clear pathways for improvement. The most important opportunities are teacher development, resource provision, collaboration, localized inclusion planning, referral systems, and monitoring support. These opportunities directly support the proposed reframing framework of the study.

Table 5

Exploratory Relationships among Challenges, Current Reforms, and Opportunities for Strengthening Special Education

Variables Correlated	Pearson r	p-value	Interpretation	Decision
Challenges and Current Reforms	.42	.021	Moderate positive	Significant
Current Reforms and Opportunities	.56	.001	Moderate positive	Significant
Challenges and Opportunities	.49	.006	Moderate positive	Significant

Table 5 presents exploratory relationships among challenges, current reforms, and strengthening opportunities using the 30 valid survey responses. All coefficients were significant at $\alpha = .05$, but interpretation emphasized direction, magnitude, and shared variance. The moderate coefficients indicate association without full explanation. Because the study used a small accessible population and a cross-sectional correlational design, the findings show co-occurrence within the participant group and do not establish causation or province-wide generalizability.

Challenges and current reforms were moderately and positively related, $r = .42$, $p = .021$, representing about 17.6% shared variance. Respondents who perceived more serious implementation difficulties also tended to recognize reforms more strongly. Resource shortages, weak referral systems, and limited teacher preparation may make policy measures more visible or urgently valued. However, most variance remained unexplained, indicating the influence of leadership, communication, school context, and other factors. With only 30 respondents, the pattern requires confirmation through a larger study.

Current reforms and opportunities produced the strongest relationship, $r = .56$, $p = .001$, with approximately 31.4% shared variance. This suggests that respondents who perceived policies, accommodations, monitoring, and legal mandates as more evident were also more likely to identify feasible pathways for improvement. Reform visibility may function as an enabling platform because it provides language, authority, and organizational direction for training, resource mobilization, referral improvement, and collaborative planning. The result does not prove that policy awareness causes these opportunities; it indicates only that the two assessments moved together among the 30 participating stakeholders.

Challenges and opportunities were moderately related, $r = .49$, $p = .006$, accounting for about 24.0% shared variance. Respondents translated experienced barriers into priorities for

teacher development, assistive resources, collaboration, localized planning, and monitoring. The pattern supports needs-based reform planning because visible barriers identify possible targets for resources and technical assistance. Nevertheless, the moderate coefficient and small participant group do not show that problem recognition automatically produces action or that the relationship applies equally to other schools.

Collectively, the exploratory correlations show an interconnected pattern among challenges, reforms, and opportunities within the 30 respondents. They support a reframing framework linking diagnosis, policy response, and improvement action, while remaining context-specific, probabilistic, and non-causal. Replication with a larger and more diverse probability-based sample is needed before the magnitude of the relationships can be generalized across Laguna.

Qualitative Findings on Stakeholder Experiences in Special Education Implementation

The semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically to explain the survey patterns. Five key informants, one from each stakeholder group, were coded KI-01 to KI-05 to protect confidentiality. Codes formed five themes concerning instructional resources, teacher preparation, referral and diagnostic support, parent-school coordination, and policy implementation. As the informants came from the same 30 respondents, the qualitative phase added depth without increasing the number of unique participants. Table 6 presents representative excerpts and links to the quantitative findings.

Table 6

Qualitative Themes, Coding Categories, and Supporting Narratives

Major Theme	Coding Categories	Supporting Narrative/Participant Excerpt	Link to Quantitative Findings
Limited instructional resources	lack of adapted materials; limited assistive devices; insufficient classroom facilities; teacher improvisation	“There are times when teachers have to create their own materials because the available resources are not enough for the specific needs of the learners.” (KI-01)	Supports the result that adequacy of learning resources and facilities was the highest-rated challenge.

Need for teacher training	limited SPED training; need for differentiated instruction; need for behavior management strategies; lack of coaching	“Teachers are willing to help, but many still need practical training on how to handle learners with different needs in an inclusive classroom.” (KI-02)	Supports the high rating for teacher preparedness and professional development as a major challenge.
Weak referral and diagnostic support	unclear referral process; delayed assessment; lack of specialists; limited access to formal diagnosis	“Some learners show signs that they need assessment, but the process is not always clear, and access to specialists is limited.” (KI-03)	Explains the lower rating for Child Find and referral-related practices.
Parent-school coordination gaps	irregular communication; limited parental involvement; difficulty in follow-up; need for home-school support	“Learner progress is better when parents and teachers communicate, but coordination is not always consistent.” (KI-04)	Supports the finding that collaboration among schools, families, and communities remains a continuing concern.
Uneven policy implementation	policy awareness; inconsistent school-level application; limited monitoring; varying school capacity	“The policies are already known, but implementation depends on the resources, leadership, and readiness of each school.” (KI-05)	Supports the result that reforms are evident but not yet fully operationalized at the school level.

The first theme that emerged from the interviews was limited instructional resources. Participants shared that although teachers attempt to provide appropriate learning support, the lack of adapted materials, assistive devices, and accessible facilities makes implementation difficult. In many cases, teachers need to improvise instructional materials based on available classroom resources. This supports the quantitative finding that adequacy of learning resources and facilities was the most serious challenge in special education implementation. The result indicates that inclusive education cannot be fully realized when schools lack the physical, instructional, and assistive resources needed by learners with disabilities.

The second theme was the need for teacher training. Participants emphasized that many teachers are willing to support learners with disabilities, but they need continuous and practical training. The responses highlighted the need for capacity-building in differentiated instruction, inclusive classroom management, assessment modification, behavior support, and individualized learning accommodations. This finding confirms the quantitative result showing that teacher preparedness and professional development was rated to a very high extent as a challenge. It suggests that teacher commitment must be supported by sustained professional development and coaching.

The third theme was weak referral and diagnostic support. Participants noted that some learners may show signs of learning, behavioral, developmental, or physical needs, but the process of identification, assessment, and referral is not always clear or accessible. Limited availability of specialists and delays in formal diagnosis were also identified as concerns. This explains why Child Find and referral-related practices received a lower rating among the current reforms and practices. The finding suggests that schools need clearer referral pathways, stronger coordination with specialists, and more systematic implementation of Child Find mechanisms.

The fourth theme was parent-school coordination gaps. Participants recognized that learners with disabilities receive better support when teachers, parents, and school personnel communicate regularly. However, the responses also showed that parent-school coordination is not always consistent. Some parents may have limited availability, limited awareness of intervention practices, or difficulty sustaining follow-up activities at home. This finding supports the quantitative result showing that collaboration among schools, families, and communities remains a high-level challenge. It implies that inclusive education requires strong home-school-community partnerships to ensure continuity of support.

The fifth theme was uneven policy implementation. Participants recognized Republic Act No. 11650 and relevant DepEd issuances, yet they described substantial differences in how schools operationalized them. This distinction explains why policy awareness can be high while implementation remains incomplete. Awareness is a necessary cognitive condition, but implementation requires assigned responsibilities, trained personnel, accessible resources, referral routines, leadership follow-through, and monitoring data. Where these enabling conditions are weak, policy remains symbolic or episodic rather than embedded in everyday practice. The qualitative evidence therefore supports the survey finding that reforms are visible but not fully institutionalized and identifies implementation fidelity—not policy absence—as the central concern.

Table 7
Mixed-Methods Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Quantitative Result	Coded Qualitative Evidence	Integration	Meta-inference
Challenges were high overall (M = 4.12); resources (M = 4.38) and teacher preparedness (M = 4.24) ranked highest.	Limited materials and teacher improvisation (KI-01); need for practical training and coaching (KI-02).	Convergent	Inclusion is constrained primarily by material and professional capacity, not by lack of stakeholder willingness.
Current reforms were highly evident (M = 3.90), but administrative support and referral practices ranked lowest.	Policies were known, yet application varied with leadership, resources, and readiness (KI-03, KI-05).	Convergent and explanatory	Policy awareness does not ensure implementation fidelity; operational routines and institutional support mediate translation into practice.
Opportunities were rated very high (M = 4.31), led by sustained training, assistive resources, and collaboration.	Informants prioritized coaching, adapted materials, specialist access, and consistent home-school communication (KI-01–KI-04).	Convergent	Stakeholders identified feasible reforms that directly correspond to the most serious implementation barriers.
Reforms and opportunities were moderately related, $r = .56$, $p = .001$.	Visible policies gave stakeholders a basis for proposing concrete school-level improvements (KI-05).	Complementary	Reform visibility can enable action when accompanied by resources, authority, and technical guidance; correlation does not establish causation.

Challenges and opportunities were moderately related, $r = .49, p = .006$.	Participants converted experienced barriers into specific recommendations for training, resources, referral, and collaboration.	Convergent	A needs-based reframing framework should connect diagnosed barriers to targeted, monitored implementation responses.
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Table 7 integrates the numerical results with coded qualitative evidence and presents the resulting meta-inferences. The joint display demonstrates that the two strands do more than repeat one another: interview evidence explains why the highest survey ratings clustered around resources and teacher capability, why recognized reforms remain uneven in practice, and why stakeholders perceive strong improvement opportunities. No major contradiction emerged between the strands; instead, qualitative data clarified the institutional conditions underlying the quantitative patterns.

The integrated evidence strengthens the study's central argument that special education in Laguna must be reframed as a coordinated, systems-based, and context-responsive component of inclusive education. Barriers were distributed across professional capacity, material provision, administrative support, referral processes, family participation, and implementation monitoring. Correspondingly, proposed solutions were also systemic. The findings therefore reject a narrow explanation that places responsibility solely on individual teachers or learners and instead locate reform within the interaction of school, family, community, and policy systems.

The integrated findings are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory because they show that special education implementation is influenced by multiple interacting systems, including teachers, families, schools, communities, and policy structures. The findings also reflect the social model of disability because they show that barriers to learning are not located only within the learner, but also in the environment, resources, attitudes, policies, and institutional practices surrounding the learner.

Based on these findings, the study proposes that special education in Laguna should be reframed through five interrelated pillars: teacher capability enhancement, accessible resources and assistive supports, structured stakeholder collaboration, localized school-based innovation, and policy-to-practice monitoring. These pillars address both the challenges and opportunities identified in the study and provide a practical direction for strengthening inclusive education implementation.

Proposed Reframing Framework for Special Education in Laguna

Based on the integrated findings, the study proposes a reframing framework for special education in Laguna anchored on five interrelated pillars. The first pillar is teacher capability enhancement, which emphasizes sustained professional development, coaching, mentoring, and practical training for both SPED and general education teachers. The second pillar is accessible resources and assistive supports, which highlights the need for adapted learning materials, assistive technology, accessible facilities, and specialized instructional tools. The third pillar is structured stakeholder collaboration, which promotes stronger coordination among teachers, parents, school heads, SPED coordinators, community partners, and support providers. The fourth pillar is localized school-based innovation, which recognizes that schools have different needs and conditions. Therefore, inclusive education plans should be responsive to the actual context of each school. The fifth pillar is policy-to-practice monitoring and systems strengthening, which emphasizes the need for regular technical assistance, implementation review, monitoring of accommodations, and stronger administrative support. Through this framework, special education in Laguna may be reframed from a limited service-delivery model into a more inclusive, collaborative, and systems-oriented educational approach. This reframing is necessary to ensure that learners with disabilities are not only recognized by policy but are also meaningfully supported in actual school settings.

7. Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, special education in Laguna remains in a transitional stage. Inclusive education policies and reforms are already visible, particularly through the recognition of Republic Act No. 11650, DepEd policies, school-based accommodations, and monitoring efforts. However, the implementation of these reforms remains challenged by limited instructional resources, insufficient assistive support, inadequate facilities, teacher preparedness concerns, weak referral mechanisms, and uneven policy operationalization.

The findings further show that the challenges in special education are systemic rather than isolated. They are not caused by one factor alone but by the interaction of teacher capacity, school resources, administrative support, family participation, referral systems, and policy implementation. This confirms that special education cannot be strengthened through classroom-level interventions only. It requires coordinated support from schools, families, communities, local education offices, and policy implementers.

Quantitatively, the 30 participating stakeholders perceived implementation challenges as high and current reforms as highly evident but incompletely institutionalized. Exploratory correlations showed moderate positive associations, although these were context-specific and non-causal. Qualitatively, five informants described limited resources, training needs, weak diagnostic and referral support, parent-school coordination gaps, and uneven policy implementation. The converging evidence indicates that reform awareness exists, but routine

implementation depends on resources, professional capability, leadership, collaboration, and monitoring.

Therefore, the study concludes that reframing special education in Laguna requires a systems-based, collaborative, and context-responsive approach. This reframing should focus on strengthening teacher capability, improving access to resources and assistive technology, establishing clearer referral mechanisms, enhancing family and community collaboration, and ensuring consistent policy-to-practice monitoring.

8. Recommendations

In light of the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are offered: First, schools and division offices should strengthen teacher capability through sustained professional development programs. Training should focus on differentiated instruction, assessment accommodations, behavior management, individualized support, inclusive classroom strategies, and the use of assistive technology. These training programs should not be limited to one-time seminars but should include coaching, mentoring, peer learning, and continuous technical assistance. Second, schools, local government units, DepEd offices, and partner agencies should prioritize the provision of adequate instructional resources, assistive devices, adapted learning materials, and accessible facilities. Since resource inadequacy was identified as one of the most serious challenges, improving the availability of learning support materials is necessary for meaningful inclusion. Third, school heads and SPED coordinators should strengthen referral and Child Find mechanisms. Schools should establish clearer procedures for identifying learners with disabilities, coordinating assessments, documenting learner needs, and referring learners to appropriate services. Stronger coordination with health professionals, specialists, parents, and local support agencies is also recommended. Fourth, schools should strengthen parent-school-community collaboration. Regular communication with parents or guardians should be promoted to ensure continuity of learner support between home and school. Parent orientation, consultation sessions, progress conferences, and collaborative intervention planning may help improve participation and follow-up. Fifth, DepEd offices and school administrators should strengthen monitoring and technical assistance for inclusive education implementation. Policy awareness must be translated into actual practice through regular implementation review, classroom observation, technical support, resource mapping, and school-based inclusion planning. Sixth, schools should develop localized inclusion plans based on their actual needs, learner profiles, resources, and community context. Since schools differ in capacity and setting, inclusion programs should be flexible, realistic, and responsive to local conditions.

9. Proposed Framework Implications

The proposed reframing framework implies that special education in Laguna should be viewed as a shared and coordinated responsibility rather than as a separate program handled only

by SPED teachers. The framework highlights five major pillars: teacher capability enhancement, accessible resources and assistive supports, structured stakeholder collaboration, localized school-based innovation, and policy-to-practice monitoring.

For teachers, the framework implies the need for continuous professional support so they can respond effectively to diverse learner needs. For school heads, it emphasizes the importance of leadership, planning, resource allocation, and monitoring. For parents and communities, it highlights their role as active partners in learner support. For DepEd and local government units, it emphasizes the need to provide technical, financial, and institutional support to schools.

The framework also implies that inclusive education should not remain only at the level of policy compliance. It should become part of school culture, instructional planning, learner support systems, and community partnership. Through this framework, special education may be reframed from a limited service-delivery model into a more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable educational system.

10. Future Research Directions

Future research should involve more schools, divisions, and substantially larger respondent groups. Because the present study was limited to 30 available stakeholders and five embedded key informants, probability-based or multi-site replication would provide more stable subgroup estimates and stronger external validity. Larger datasets could also support confirmatory factor analysis, reliable group comparisons, and multivariable modeling of factors affecting inclusive education implementation.

Future studies may also examine the actual learning outcomes of learners with disabilities in relation to teacher preparedness, availability of resources, and school-based inclusive practices. This would help determine whether inclusive education reforms are not only visible but also effective in improving learner participation, achievement, and well-being.

Further research may also focus on the implementation of Child Find, referral systems, and Inclusive Learning Resource Centers. Since these areas emerged as important concerns, more focused studies may help identify specific operational gaps and practical solutions.

Finally, future researchers may validate or pilot-test the proposed reframing framework in selected schools. This may determine whether the framework is practical, effective, and adaptable to different educational settings.

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