

Original Article

From Policy to Practice: Insights into Inclusive Education Leadership in Philippine Public Schools

Mark Jason A. Orbita¹, Zandro P. Ibañez², Lady Lou I. Lepasana², Jay Mark D. Ducoy²

Author Information:

¹Educational Management Department,
Institute of Graduate and Professional
Education, Davao del Sur State College,
Digos City, Philippines

²Language Teaching Department, Institute of
Graduate and Professional Education,
Davao del Sur State College, Digos City,
Philippines

Corresponding Author:

Markjason.orbita@deped.gov.ph

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Abstract. Inclusive education seeks to ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners, including those with diverse learning needs and disabilities. In the Philippines, the successful implementation of inclusive education policies largely depends on the leadership of school heads, who translate policy into practice within their schools. This study explored the lived experiences, strategies, and insights of school heads in implementing inclusive education policies in public schools in Padada District, Davao del Sur. Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with ten school heads directly involved in implementing inclusive education programs. Data were analyzed using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological analysis. Findings revealed two major themes related to the lived experiences of school heads: (1) Navigating Multifaceted Barriers in Special Needs Education Development (SNED) Policy-to-Practice Integration and (2) Cultivating Responsive and Adaptive Leadership in Advancing Inclusive SNED Practice. Participants identified challenges such as inadequate training, limited resources, systemic constraints, and varying levels of parental engagement. To address these challenges, school heads employed strategies centered on stakeholder collaboration, teacher support, resource mobilization, advocacy, and continuous monitoring of inclusive practices. The study further showed that school heads gained valuable insights into collaborative leadership, community engagement, continuous improvement, teacher empowerment, and a commitment to equity and access. These findings highlight the critical role of adaptive and responsive leadership in sustaining inclusive education initiatives. The study recommends strengthening leadership development programs, increasing institutional support, and enhancing stakeholder partnerships to improve the implementation and sustainability of inclusive education in public schools.

Keywords: *Insights; Lived experiences; Qualitative study; Special Needs Education Development (SNED); Strategies.*

Inclusive education has become a global priority, driven by international commitments such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes equitable and inclusive quality education for all learners. Despite significant policy advances worldwide, many education systems continue to struggle with translating inclusive education policies into meaningful classroom practices. UNESCO estimates that more than 240 million children worldwide live with disabilities, many of whom continue to face barriers to accessing quality education, particularly in developing countries. While governments have increasingly adopted inclusive

education policies, implementation challenges remain evident in areas such as teacher preparedness, resource allocation, leadership capacity, and stakeholder engagement.

In the Philippines, inclusive education has been strengthened through legislative and policy reforms, including Republic Act No. 11650, the Inclusive Education Act, and various Department of Education (DepEd) policies supporting learners with disabilities and diverse educational needs. These policies articulate a strong commitment to educational inclusion; however, evidence from local studies suggests that implementation remains uneven across schools. Challenges such as insufficient teacher training, inadequate learning resources, limited specialized personnel, and inconsistent stakeholder support continue to hinder the realization of policy objectives. These concerns suggest a persistent gap between policy intentions and actual school-level practices.

School heads occupy a critical position in bridging this policy-practice divide. Beyond administrative responsibilities, they are expected to lead organizational change, mobilize resources, support teachers, engage families and communities, and foster inclusive school cultures. However, while existing studies have documented implementation challenges in inclusive education, fewer studies have explored how school leaders navigate these challenges and translate policy mandates into everyday practice. Understanding their experiences is particularly important because leadership decisions directly influence how inclusive education policies are interpreted, adapted, and sustained within schools.

This study is guided by Transformative Leadership Theory, which emphasizes equity, social justice, and systemic change, and aligns closely with the principles of inclusive education. Through this lens, school heads are viewed not merely as policy implementers but as agents of change who work to remove barriers and create more inclusive learning environments. By examining the lived experiences of school heads in implementing Special Needs Education Development (SNED) programs, this study seeks to generate insights that can inform the refinement of inclusive education policies, strengthen leadership preparation and professional development programs, and improve support mechanisms for school leaders tasked with advancing inclusive education in Philippine public schools.

Specifically, the findings may enhance school leadership development programs by identifying competencies needed for inclusive leadership, including stakeholder collaboration, resource mobilization, adaptive decision-making, and advocacy for learners with special educational needs. Likewise, the findings may provide evidence for strengthening policy implementation guidelines, capacity-building initiatives, and support systems necessary for the effective delivery of inclusive education programs.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research design to explore and interpret the lived experiences of school heads in implementing inclusive education policies in public schools. Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected because the study sought not only to describe participants' experiences but also to interpret the meanings they attached to those experiences within their specific educational, organizational, and social contexts.

This approach was considered more appropriate than a case study design because the investigation focused not on a particular school, program, or bounded system, but on the shared meanings and lived experiences of school heads across different school settings. Likewise, hermeneutic phenomenology was preferred over transcendental (descriptive) phenomenology because the study aimed to move beyond describing the essence of the phenomenon and instead understand how participants interpreted and made sense of their experiences in implementing inclusive education policies.

Unlike transcendental phenomenology, which emphasizes researcher bracketing to minimize prior assumptions, hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that interpretation is an inherent part of understanding human experience. Guided by the philosophical perspectives of Gadamer and van Manen, this study recognized that meaning emerges through the interaction between participants' narratives and the researcher's interpretation. Through this approach, the researcher sought to uncover deeper meanings embedded in participants' experiences

and gain a richer understanding of how school heads navigated the gap between inclusive education policies and actual school practices.

Results and Discussion

Navigate Multifaceted Barriers in SNED Policy-to-Practice Integration

In this context, principals are important figures because of their role in enforcing and understanding inclusive education policy. They take an active role in shaping the understanding and practice of inclusion in their schools, going beyond simply ensuring compliance with national regulations. Their commitment to diversity, equality, and student-centered learning is evident in their leadership, which reflects both their professional and personal views on administration.

School heads often see inclusive education as a moral obligation as well as a strategic strategy to enhance teaching. They oversee instruction, manage resources, and promote collaboration among educators, parents, and the community. Principals' daily experiences reveal that their attitudes on inclusive education shift. Resource shortages, teacher ability, and children's specific needs compel many to rethink inclusivity.

Inadequate Training and Professional Development

One of the biggest obstacles, even with inclusive education legislation in place, is the lack of training for educators. Supporting diverse learners, particularly those with special needs, is a challenge for many instructors who lack the necessary training, skills, and self-assurance. Because of this, effective implementation is limited, making strong school leadership and professional development for teachers crucial for inclusive education. The informants conveyed their experiences in the following lines:

"The teachers are hesitant because of a lack of training. Some parents are in denial upon knowing feedback from the teachers, and some learners are submissive, but some are resistant."
(KII5P5)

This claim was also supported by other informant that inadequate professional development to equip teachers with the skills necessary for inclusive education who expressed the same sentiments:

"We need more workshops and training sessions focused on inclusive education strategies to help our teachers feel more confident."
(KII6P6)

Participants consistently described inadequate training as more than a technical concern. Their narratives revealed a deeper sense of uncertainty among teachers when addressing the needs of learners with disabilities and other diverse learning needs. School heads observed that teachers often hesitated to implement inclusive practices because they lacked confidence in adapting instruction, conducting learner assessments, and managing inclusive classrooms.

From the perspective of the participating school heads, professional development was not simply a requirement for policy compliance but a crucial condition for meaningful inclusion. The findings suggest that when teachers are insufficiently prepared, school leaders must expend additional effort in providing guidance, reassurance, and instructional support. This reinforces the view that inclusive education requires sustained investments in teacher capacity-building rather than isolated training activities.

These findings support Apriliani et al. (2024), who emphasized that the successful implementation of inclusive education depends on continuous professional development and specialized support systems. However, the present study extends this understanding by highlighting how inadequate teacher preparation directly influences school heads' leadership practices and their ability to bridge the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities.

Resource Constraints and Systemic Barriers

Limited resources hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education. The informants conveyed their experiences in the following lines:

"I need to ensure that policies are implemented even with limited resources. As a school head, it is my role to implement DepEd programs and policies in my school."
(KII10P10)

The absence of appropriate learning materials and resources for diverse learners. This claim was also supported by other informant, who expressed the same sentiments:

"We struggle to find suitable learning materials that cater to the needs of all students, especially those with special needs."
(KII1P2)

School heads often face bureaucratic hurdles that slow down the implementation of inclusive education policies. Thus, when given the identical topic, informants signified their own experiences:

"The policies are there, but the bureaucratic processes make it difficult to implement them effectively."
(KII8P8)

Inconsistent policy support from higher authorities leads to confusion and frustration at the school level. This claim was also supported by other informant, who expressed the same sentiments:

"Sometimes, the directives from the district office are unclear, which creates challenges in how we implement inclusive education."
(KII4P4)

Participants described resource limitations as a persistent structural challenge that constrained their ability to fully implement inclusive education. Beyond shortages of instructional materials, school heads discussed how bureaucratic procedures, inconsistent policy directives, and limited financial support complicated decision-making processes. Their experiences suggest that commitment to inclusion alone is insufficient when schools operate within systems that lack adequate resources and coherent implementation mechanisms.

Parental Resistance and Limited Engagement

Denial of learning difficulties by the learners from their parents. The informants' experiences highlight that inclusive education is not merely a policy mandate but a complex, lived process shaped by everyday realities in schools, as conveyed in their experiences in the following lines:

"As a school head, I have experienced a situation where a parent was in denial about her child's learning difficulties. In such cases, it becomes challenging to provide appropriate support"
(KII5P5)

With limited parental engagement. This claim was also supported by another informant, who expressed the same sentiments:

"Some parents are not involved in the process, which makes it harder to create a supportive environment for their children"
(KII9P9)

A particularly challenging experience described by participants involved parental denial of learners' disabilities or learning difficulties. School heads frequently found themselves balancing professional recommendations with parents' emotional responses to assessment results. These situations often delayed referrals, interventions, and access to appropriate educational support.

The findings suggest that parental resistance is not merely a matter of non-cooperation but is frequently rooted in fear, stigma, limited awareness, and concerns about labeling. This interpretation aligns with Gilson and Etscheidt

(2022), who emphasized that educational leaders must possess both technical knowledge and interpersonal skills to effectively engage families in special education processes. For school heads, fostering trust and building partnerships with parents emerged as an essential component of inclusive leadership.

Cultivated Responsive and Adaptive Leadership in Advancing Inclusive SNED Practice

School heads significantly influence the implementation of inclusive Special Needs Education (SNED). As education leaders, they must guarantee that all students, regardless of socioeconomic position, talent, or other factors, have equal academic opportunities. Leadership in inclusive education goes beyond administrative responsibilities. It requires commitment to equality, empathy, and learning. School leaders must be adaptable to promote inclusive SNED practices. Effective leadership can adapt to student, teacher, and school demands. School leaders must listen, engage stakeholders, and make informed decisions to advance inclusive goals. Adaptive leadership helps school administrators handle complex difficulties including limited resources, poor teacher preparation, and varied student readiness by being flexible and inventive. Schools with flexible, responsive leaders allow instructors to try new things, including inclusive techniques and personalized curriculum. They work with parents, specialists, and community members to improve professionally, foster reflection, and build partnerships. Principals may make classroom inclusion more than a goal and help bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Witness Positive Responses and Adapting Support of Inclusive Education

School heads reported a positive shift in attitudes among teachers, parents, and learners towards inclusive education. This statement was confirmed by the informant below:

"The teachers, parents, and learners have responded positively, showing increased cooperation and support for inclusive education."
(KII7P7)

School heads have adapted their practices to better accommodate diverse learners, leading to improved educational outcomes. The following statement from the informant reinforces this finding:

"We conducted learners' assessment, teachers' orientation capacity building in handling different kinds of learners and handling learners according to their needs."
(KII5P5)

Effective implementation is often supported by community awareness and involvement in inclusive education policies. This is further validated by the informant's account below:

"In our community, they are well-informed about the SNED; parents are well aware of the policies."
(KII10P10)

This implies that school leaders are making a difference by advocating for SNED practices when they observe positive responses and adaptive support in inclusive education. As a result, stakeholders such as parents and educators are working to meet the needs of students with disabilities. An inclusive school culture that celebrates diversity and participation is fostered, learner-centered interventions are improved, and cooperation is strengthened. It stresses the need for school administrators to maintain responsive, adaptable leadership by consistently providing advice, tools, and support to improve inclusive practices. School leaders play a critical role in fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments by promoting practices that ensure all learners are supported regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. Effective inclusive leadership involves creating school conditions that encourage participation, collaboration, and equal opportunities for all stakeholders (Leithwood, 2021). Furthermore, the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads emphasize that school leaders are expected to champion inclusive, learner-centered, and responsive educational environments that address the diverse needs of learners (Department of Education, 2020).

Exercise Leadership and Advocating for SNED

By highlighting the school head's identity as a champion of inclusive education, the statement reveals how school heads view their role as extending beyond administrative responsibilities. The assumption here was that school administrators work to make their institutions more welcoming to students with diverse backgrounds and abilities by advocating for more equitable access, accommodations, and inclusionary policies. It was their duty as advocates to rally stakeholders behind SNED programs, shape policy, and provide instruction to educators. All students should have equal opportunity to achieve, and this viewpoint indicates a dedication to leadership that values learner diversity. The informant's testimony below confirms this assertion:

"School head should be an advocate of inclusive education, not just an administrator only."
(KII8P8)

Leading inclusive education initiatives has contributed to their personal and professional growth. The informant's response below affirms this point:

"As a School head, I gain valuable growth and leadership experiences as I effectively support diverse learners through inclusive education."
(KII7P7)

To ensure that inclusive education is effectively implemented, school heads should raise community awareness and encourage stakeholder engagement in the SNED policy. Within the school community, this assistance helps establish common awareness and commitment to inclusion. This was further validated by the informant's account below:

"The community is already well-informed about the SNED; parents are well aware of the policies."
(KII8P8)

This implies that, as leaders who champion SNED, school administrators play a vital role in promoting inclusive education. It calls on them to raise awareness, support inclusive policies, and make choices and implement programs that prioritize students with special needs. This ability to persuade educators, parents, and other stakeholders to support inclusive approaches through coordinated effort is bolstered, which may help create a welcoming classroom for all students by taking the lead in advocating for fairness and inclusion.

Moreover, Beltran et al. (2025) presented the idea that education is changing and is centered on inclusive education for special needs, and used qualitative interviews as part of an exploratory sequential mixed-methods strategy. School districts make efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, but often encounter challenges such as a lack of funding, low parental participation, and insufficient professional development opportunities for educators. Creating supportive environments, implementing collaborative practices, and providing students with individualized instruction are all effective strategies. There is a clear disconnect between parents and educators in working together to meet students' needs. For more accurate statistics and more effective resource allocation, the report suggests that the Department of Education require schools to record students with special needs.

Collaborative and Capacity-Building Approaches for Advancing Inclusive Education Implementation

Promoting inclusive education via leadership, cooperation, and capacity development is an important responsibility of school administrators. To ensure that all parties involved in implementing SNED work together, instructional leaders cultivate a school climate that values collaboration, shared accountability, and ongoing professional development among educators. Partnerships and communication among stakeholders are strengthened through cooperation, enabling collaborative solutions to challenges in inclusive education. Concurrently, training, coaching, and mentoring are capacity-building initiatives that provide educators the tools and self-assurance they need to meet the demands of their varied student bodies. As a whole, these leadership methods help principals build classrooms that welcome and encourage all students, regardless of their backgrounds or skills.

Community and Parental Engagement

To implement inclusive Special Needs Education Development (SNED), school heads must build strong connections and maintain relationships with educators, parents, and community members to ensure that children with special needs receive ongoing support. Promoting open discussion and trust may help school directors engage parents and hold them accountable for their children's education. They team up with other groups to address shortages in educational services and support, mobilize resources, and build a more welcoming and inclusive school atmosphere for all kids by partnering with stakeholders. The informants conveyed their experiences in the following lines:

"Start small, support your teachers, our teachers, and build strong partnerships within the community, most especially the LGU, our barangay officials, the parents, of course".
(KII3P3)

Inclusive SNED implementation requires school administrators to mobilize financial, human, and material resources. LGUs, NGOs, parents, and other interested parties may help increase school financing. Using present resources effectively and filling gaps in learning materials, assistive equipment, and teacher training. Efficient resource mobilization improves inclusive education by ensuring that students with special needs receive adequate, long-term support. This claim was also supported by other informant that inadequate professional development to equip teachers with the skills necessary for inclusive education who expressed the same sentiments:

"We built partnerships with parents and local community stakeholders to help provide additional resources and assistance for inclusive education."
(KII7P7)

To embrace an inclusive SNED, school leaders need to communicate. Consistent and clear communication is maintained among stakeholders, parents, students, and educators. Building trust and transparency, and providing timely learner supports, enhance home-school collaboration. The informants conveyed their experiences in the following lines:

"We need to keep parents informed about their children's progress and behavior in school. When they see that we care, they are more likely to engage with us".
(KII6P6)

This implies that in implementing inclusive SNED, school leaders should prioritize community and parental participation. It necessitates that they include parents and community members in special education decision-making, programming, and support efforts. School heads should work toward this goal by cultivating relationships based on mutual respect, open dialogue, and equitable distribution of responsibilities. School responsiveness to various needs and to student growth improves when parents and the community are actively involved. When school leaders actively participate, they can create a more welcoming and accommodating classroom for students with special needs, where everyone pitches in to help these students succeed.

As stipulated by Jimenez (2025) regarding how public elementary school teachers in Las Piñas City's DepEd Division deal with inclusive education, the results show that policies, practices, and infrastructure are highly inclusive. This is especially true regarding teachers' attitudes and awareness. Still, there are many obstacles to overcome, including confusing rules, biased teachers, a lack of knowledge, and poor infrastructure. A plan called the "Inclusive Education Excellence Initiative (IEEI)" was implemented to address these problems; it aimed to enhance infrastructure, promote inclusion, and train teachers to be more inclusive.

Continuous Professional Development

For inclusive SNED implementation to be successful, school heads play a crucial role in providing teachers with the training and support they need. Teachers' ability to meet the needs of students with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities is a key component of their work as instructional leaders, as conveyed in their experiences in the following lines:

"Sending them to trainings and workshops so that they will become more expert in their field."

(KII2P2)

Sharing accomplishments helps school administrators and teachers embrace inclusive SNED. To suit students' needs, it promotes cooperation, creativity, and growth. Shared successes may help school administrators improve teacher professional development and inclusive practices. This claim was also supported by other informant, who expressed the same sentiments:

" One of them is that conducting INSET and LAC sessions focused on inclusion and sharing best practices among teachers".

(KII9P9)

This implies that school heads should model a growth mindset for their staff by participating in professional development opportunities, such as seminars and training sessions. School heads' ability to lead, direct instructional practices, and promote inclusive solutions in schools is enhanced by their dedication to continual learning, which can improve their implementation and maintenance of inclusive education through continual professional development, making them more responsive and adaptable leaders.

The findings reveal that professional development serves a dual function in inclusive education. Beyond improving teachers' technical competencies, training opportunities also cultivate confidence, collaboration, and a sense of collective responsibility for learner success. Participants viewed seminars, workshops, Learning Action Cells (LAC), and INSET activities as important spaces where teachers could exchange experiences, reflect on challenges, and develop inclusive teaching practices.

These findings support Palma (2024), who emphasized the importance of innovation, resilience, and continuous learning among school leaders. However, the present study extends Palma's work by demonstrating how professional development serves as a leadership strategy to sustain inclusive education. School heads did not merely facilitate training activities; they actively created learning cultures that encouraged adaptation, reflection, and continuous improvement. From a transformational leadership perspective, this reflects leaders' efforts to inspire growth, build professional capacity, and foster a shared commitment to inclusive education goals.

Sustain Inclusive Education Through Collaborative, Empowered, and Equitable Leadership

Leadership that is collaborative, empowering, and equitable is essential to the sustainability of inclusive education, and school principals play a pivotal role in implementing Special Needs Education Development (SNED). The findings highlighted the critical importance of these leadership aspects in enhancing inclusive practices in schools on an ongoing basis. Through collaborative decision-making and transparent communication, school administrators encourage stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students, and community members, to work together. School heads can confidently meet the needs of diverse learners through empowered leadership that fosters innovation. On the other hand, equitable leadership guarantees that all learners have fair access to resources, support, and opportunities.

Collaboration and Teamwork

Inclusive education thrives on collaboration among all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and the community. This statement was confirmed by the informant below:

"We cannot do inclusive education alone; it needs teamwork from everyone".

(KII9P9)

School heads build strong partnerships for effective implementation and support. The following statement from the informant reinforces this finding:

"We need to have strong partnerships with our stakeholders and colleagues."

(KII8P8)

This implies that school heads should note that teamwork and cooperation in SNED implementation emphasize the need for shared responsibility in serving special education students' needs. School administrators must foster strong cooperation between instructors, parents, and other stakeholders to achieve inclusive education. They must promote open debate, collective decision-making, and support for students, teachers, and staff. Students receive better support when school officials collaborate to create and implement the SNED program. Finally, school administrators can create an inclusive, unified school culture where everyone works together to enhance student achievement.

Fabunan and Cabal (2025) examined how well school administrators were able to implement inclusive education. Both sets of respondents said that school administrators demonstrated exceptional competence across the board. Collaboration with instructors, evaluation of student work, and the implementation of policies that encourage diversity and peace were the defining characteristics of instructional leadership. The development of structures for cooperation and the alignment of personnel with school objectives were prominent features of managerial leadership. The importance of vision-setting, encouraging creativity, and coordinating school culture with instructional goals was highlighted by innovative and strategic thinking. Prioritizing personal qualities such as emotional intelligence, responsibility, and resilience, stakeholder engagement aimed to cultivate relationships and build support networks. The implementation of the inclusive education policy and the resolution of resource constraints remain obstacles, despite the high competency ratings. Significant discrepancies in perspectives between school heads and instructors highlighted the need for better communication and collaborative leadership.

Continuous Improvement and Adaptability

The need for ongoing professional development to adapt to the diverse needs of learners. The informant's testimony below confirms this assertion:

"Engage stakeholders early and invest in professional development."
(KII3P3)

The school heads' flexibility in teaching strategies is crucial as there is no one-size-fits-all approach to inclusion. The informant's response below affirms this point:

"Flexibility in teaching is important because there is no single strategy that fits all learners".
(KII7P7)

Implications for school heads in SNED implementation regarding continuous improvement and adaptability are significant, as they emphasize the need for ongoing reflection, learning, and responsiveness to evolving educational demands. To ensure that all students have access to quality education, principals should regularly assess current policies and procedures and make any required changes. This necessitates that they be receptive to new ideas, quick to respond to problems, and ready to embrace innovative approaches that cater to students from different backgrounds. School administrators may facilitate teachers' professional growth and their capacity to adjust to students' needs by promoting a flexible work environment.

Moreover, Cuizon (2024) studied inclusive education programs, how well they are being carried out, and the strategies implemented to overcome these obstacles. Teachers overcame these obstacles by cultivating an optimistic classroom environment and actively participating in self-reflection. The significance of fostering an inclusive atmosphere that respects and celebrates diversity was emphasized in the research. They drew conclusions about educational management that emphasize the need to foster an inclusive culture and to use diversity as a tool for education. Teachers may create a classroom community where every student feels welcome and supported by engaging with their students on a personal level and establishing trusting relationships.

Empowerment and Leadership

The need for school heads to empower teachers and value their contributions. The informant's testimony below confirms this assertion:

"Being a school leader is not just about giving directions or ensuring compliance; it is more about giving, listening, and empowering others."

(KII7P7)

Model inclusive behavior and set a clear vision for their schools. The informant's response below affirms this point:

"Leaders set the tone; without a clear vision, inclusion efforts can be fragmented".

(KII6P6)

School heads must prioritize empowerment and leadership when implementing SNED, as this enables them and their teachers to actively participate in inclusive education. Principals are supposed to provide an environment in which instructors feel empowered, self-assured, and eager to meet the needs of students with special needs. Supporting creative teaching approaches, fostering chances for professional development, and promoting involvement in decision-making are all necessary for this. Teachers who have a sense of agency in their work are better equipped to foster an inclusive classroom environment. To achieve more successful and long-lasting inclusive education practices, school leaders must combine strong leadership with empowerment to create a proactive and engaged school community.

School leaders play a critical role in facilitating inclusive practices. Collaborative leadership, which emphasizes shared responsibility, trust-building, and stakeholder engagement, has been shown to improve IE implementation. Principals who engage teachers, parents, and community members foster supportive learning environments where inclusive practices are consistently applied (Siton & Palma, 2024).

Commitment to Equity and Access

The school heads provided an equal opportunity for all learners, regardless of their abilities. The informant's testimony below confirms this assertion:

" No one should be left behind; no one should be deprived of education regardless of your physical disabilities".

(KII10P10)

School heads addressed the needs of learners with special needs. The informant's response below affirms this point:

"We should cater to or accept every child, school-age children in school, even those with learning difficulties and learners with disabilities".

(KII3P3)

School administrators are responsible for providing equal opportunity for all students as part of their school's dedication to inclusive education, which aligns with SDGs 4 and 10. To help students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed, school administrators should make decisions grounded in equity and encourage educators to use inclusive, differentiated instruction. To maintain inclusive practices, schools also need sufficient funding, robust regulations, and active community participation. Ultimately, this necessitates continuous improvement to ensure the efficient and adaptable implementation of inclusive education.

Consequently, Khamis and Ashraf (2024) explained that by recognizing the diverse needs of children, inclusive education ensures that every student has an equal opportunity to study and flourish. These results demonstrated that the policy is well-understood and highly regarded by school administrators. Moreover, the study found that school administrators have successfully promoted inclusive education through strategies that highlighted the need for teachers engaged in inclusive education to participate in continuous professional development and training.

Community Engagement and Support

For inclusive SNED implementation to be successful, school heads engaged the community and parents to foster an inclusive environment that conveyed their experiences in the following lines:

"Always listen to the parents and teachers; there are denial parents, and there are also teachers who are very

sensitive."
(KII8P8)

Community involvement and support system for inclusive education initiatives. This claim was also supported by another informant, who expressed the same sentiments:

"Building a stronger collaboration with families and community".
(KII6P6)

This implies that school heads support the community, including those with special needs, in having equal access to quality education, resources, and support they need; school administrators must make a firm commitment to equity and access as they implement SNED. Equal distribution of resources, inclusive policies and procedures that meet the needs of different learners, and the identification and removal of learning obstacles are all responsibilities of school administrators. School heads can ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to learn, grow, and achieve by demonstrating a deep commitment to equality and access.

According to Rodeles (2024), in the instructional supervisory skills of school heads implementing Special Needs Education in Ormoc City District 6, Schools Division of Ormoc City, effective instructional leadership plays a role in enhancing educational outcomes within schools. Based on the study's results, it is clear that school leadership must prioritize developing instructional supervisory skills. Administrators who engage in effective planning, observation, and assessment practices can better support teachers' professional growth. Moreover, the correlation found in this study emphasizes the importance of collaboration between teachers and administrators.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of school heads in implementing inclusive education policies in public schools in Davao del Sur. The findings revealed that school heads face significant challenges in translating Special Needs Education Development (SNED) policies into practice, particularly due to inadequate professional training, limited resources, systemic constraints, and insufficient parental engagement. Despite these barriers, school heads demonstrated resilience and adaptability by exercising responsive leadership, advocating for inclusive practices, and mobilizing support systems that promote equitable learning opportunities for all learners.

The study further revealed that the successful implementation of inclusive education relies heavily on collaborative and capacity-building approaches. Continuous professional development, active stakeholder engagement, and strong partnerships among schools, families, and communities emerged as essential strategies in addressing implementation challenges. Moreover, sustaining inclusive education requires leadership practices grounded in collaboration, empowerment, equity, and continuous improvement.

These findings suggest that inclusive education leadership extends beyond administrative compliance and reflects principles of Distributed Leadership, Transformative Leadership, and Social Justice Leadership. School heads function not only as managers of educational programs but also as advocates for equity, facilitators of collaboration, and agents of institutional change. Their experiences demonstrate that effective inclusive education is strengthened when leadership responsibilities are shared among stakeholders, when school leaders promote meaningful transformation in school culture, and when educational decisions are guided by a commitment to social justice and equal access to learning opportunities.

Overall, the study concludes that the successful implementation and sustainability of inclusive education depend on school heads' capacity to exercise adaptive, collaborative, and equity-oriented leadership. By fostering professional growth, strengthening stakeholder partnerships, and advocating for inclusive practices, school leaders play a critical role in transforming inclusive education policies into meaningful educational experiences for all learners.

Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational leadership theory, policy, and practice, particularly in the implementation and sustainability of inclusive education in public schools.

From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces the principles of Transformative Leadership Theory, Distributed Leadership Theory, and Social Justice Leadership Theory. The experiences of school heads demonstrate that inclusive education is most effectively implemented when leaders act as advocates for equity, foster collaborative decision-making, and inspire stakeholders to embrace inclusive values. The findings suggest that inclusive leadership is not limited to administrative functions but involves creating school cultures that promote participation, respect diversity, and ensure equitable educational opportunities for all learners. As such, the study contributes to the growing body of literature that views school leadership as a critical factor in advancing inclusive and socially just educational systems.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for strengthening the competencies of school heads and teachers in implementing inclusive education. The challenges related to inadequate training underscore the need for structured, continuous professional development programs focused on inclusive instructional practices, differentiated teaching strategies, individualized education planning, behavior management, and the use of assistive technologies. School leaders should also be equipped with skills in policy implementation, resource mobilization, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive leadership to effectively respond to the diverse needs of learners.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest the need for stronger institutional support for inclusive education initiatives. Educational authorities may consider enhancing funding mechanisms, increasing the provision of specialized personnel and instructional resources, and strengthening monitoring systems to ensure consistent implementation of inclusive education policies across schools. Furthermore, policies should promote sustainable partnerships among schools, local government units, community organizations, and parents to address resource limitations and provide comprehensive support for learners with special educational needs.

The findings also underscore the importance of strengthening parent and community engagement. Since parental resistance and limited involvement emerged as barriers to implementation, schools may develop regular awareness programs, parent education initiatives, and collaborative decision-making mechanisms that foster shared responsibility in supporting inclusive education. Building stronger partnerships between schools and families can contribute to more positive educational outcomes for learners with diverse needs.

Ultimately, the study implies that achieving sustainable inclusive education requires school heads to move beyond traditional administrative roles and embrace adaptive, collaborative, and equity-driven leadership practices. By cultivating inclusive school cultures, empowering teachers, engaging stakeholders, and advocating for equitable access to quality education, school leaders can play a pivotal role in transforming inclusive education policies into meaningful and lasting educational practices.

Future Directions

Based on the findings of this study, future initiatives should focus on strengthening school heads' leadership capacity to effectively implement and sustain inclusive education programs. Leadership development interventions should move beyond one-time training sessions and instead provide continuous learning opportunities through mentoring, coaching, peer-learning communities, and school-based professional development programs. These initiatives should emphasize inclusive leadership, adaptive decision-making, policy translation, resource mobilization, and advocacy for learners with diverse educational needs.

Future professional development programs should also be designed for both school heads and teachers and should include regular training on differentiated instruction, individualized education planning, classroom accommodations, behavior management, universal design for learning, and the integration of assistive technologies. Establishing professional learning communities within and across schools may further promote the sharing of effective inclusive practices and strengthen collective capacity to address implementation challenges. To address resource-related barriers, future efforts should prioritize developing sustainable partnerships among schools, local government units, non-governmental organizations, higher education institutions, and community stakeholders. Such partnerships may facilitate resource mobilization, technical assistance, and the provision of specialized services and learning materials necessary for implementing inclusive education.

Future initiatives should likewise strengthen parent and community engagement through sustained awareness campaigns, parent education programs, and participatory decision-making mechanisms. These efforts may help improve stakeholders' understanding of inclusive education, reduce misconceptions about learners with special educational needs, and encourage shared responsibility for supporting learner success.

Future research may expand the scope of investigation by including school heads, teachers, parents, and learners from multiple school divisions and regions to provide a broader understanding of inclusive education implementation across diverse contexts. Comparative studies between urban and rural schools may also be conducted to identify contextual factors that influence leadership practices and implementation outcomes.

Finally, future studies may explore the effectiveness of specific leadership interventions, mentoring programs, professional development models, and stakeholder engagement strategies in improving inclusive education outcomes. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies are recommended to examine how leadership practices influence teacher participation and learner achievement over time, thereby providing stronger evidence for policy formulation and educational reform.

Contributions of Authors

Author 1: conceptualization, data gathering, data analysis

Author 2: data analysis, data gathering

Author 3: proposal writing, data gathering

Author 4: proposal writing, data gathering

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the conduct, findings, or publication of this study.

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