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Inclusive Education and Its Current Implications for Learning and Mental Health: Insights from Public School Teachers

Nikko J. Malazarte[1], RPsy, RPm, LPT, ORCID No. 0009-0002-8572-3445
Deseree A. Banta[2], LPT
Mary Grace O. Serrato[3], LPT, RGC

[1]University Psychologist, De La Salle University-Manila, 2401 Taft Avenue, Manila, Philippines
[2]Teacher II, Department of Education-Division of Parañaque, Barangay Baclaran, Parañaque City, Philippines
[3]University Counsellor, De La Salle University-Manila, 2401 Taft Avenue, Manila, Philippines

Abstract

This mixed-methods study explores the culture of inclusivity in Philippine public schools and its implications for student learning and mental health. Drawing on survey data from 28 teachers, semi-structured interviews with 8 teachers, and focus group discussions with 6 students, the research examines how educators conceptualize, enact, and experience inclusive practices. Majority reported familiarity with the concept of inclusivity, implementation varies across classrooms, with barriers such as large class sizes, limited resources, and insufficient training constraining consistent practice. The following are the recurring themes such as belonging, pedagogical strategies, engagement, mental health, systemic challenges, and pathways to improvement. Teachers emphasized differentiated instruction, accessible materials, and social-emotional learning routines as central strategies, while also noting the importance of cultural responsiveness and language-inclusive practices. Students reported that inclusive environments foster confidence, reduce anxiety, and strengthen peer support. Policy developments, including Republic Act No. 11650 and recent Department of Education orders, provide structural support but remain hindered by resource gaps and identification challenges for learners with disabilities. Findings underscore the transformative potential of inclusivity in enhancing both academic outcomes and psychosocial wellbeing, while also pointing to the need for sustained professional development, stakeholder collaboration, and culturally grounded approaches. This study contributes locally contextualized evidence to inform inclusive education policy and practice, emphasizing that inclusivity is not only a pedagogical imperative but also a foundation for equitable and holistic development.

Keywords: inclusivity, inclusive education, student well-being, social-emotional learning, Philippine public schools

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive culture is increasingly framed as a relational, whole-school endeavor where belonging, equity, and participation are embedded into curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and discipline (Gkaintartzi & Skourtou, 2021; Lynch et al., 2023). Contemporary inclusion extends beyond disability access to encompass identity, language, migration, socioeconomic status, and mental health, elevating teachers' role as cultural brokers who signal belonging and psychosocial safety (Graham et al., 2020; Krammer et al., 2022). Universal design for learning (UDL), restorative practices, and social-emotional learning (SEL) have emerged as mechanisms that reduce barriers and normalize difference (Mok et al., 2023; Rojas, 2021). In Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), inclusivity is closely tied to school climate, teacher support, and policy-practice coherence, underscoring the need for context-specific approaches (Murillo & Román, 2023; Nava et al., 2024).

Evidence from multiple countries shows inclusive climates are associated with higher academic engagement, persistence, and formative assessment performance,

particularly when teachers enact UDL, scaffold group work, and provide competence-affirming feedback (Mok et al., 2023; Lynch et al., 2023). Co-teaching and MTSS-aligned supports improve access and comprehension for diverse learners when role clarity and shared planning are present (Krammer et al., 2022; Larkin et al., 2022). Belonging-focused interventions and classroom norms that reduce identity threat have shown gains in participation and task completion, moderated by teacher-student relationships (Liu et al., 2022; Rojas, 2021). Philippine studies highlight improved assignment completion, attendance, and engagement in classrooms where teachers integrate SEL routines, honor linguistic diversity, and use flexible assessments (Reyes et al., 2023; Capulong & Hernandez, 2022).

Inclusive culture is consistently associated with student wellbeing via reduced stigma, improved peer relations, and strengthened classroom connectedness (Axelsson, 2021; Lynch et al., 2023). SEL-integrated instruction supports emotion regulation and help-seeking, buffering internalizing symptoms (Liu et al., 2022; Pogé & Xiao, 2023). Restorative practices and fair discipline are linked to lower stress and better classroom safety, benefiting both students and teachers (Fronius et al., 2020; Larkin et al., 2022). School climate, which is characterized by relational trust, inclusive norms, and safety, emerges as a determinant of mental health, particularly in resource-constrained contexts (Murillo & Román, 2023). In Philippine schools, teacher-created belonging cues and culturally relevant routines are associated with lower social anxiety and improved peer support, though variability in guidance and referral pathways remains (Reyes et al., 2023; Capulong & Hernandez, 2022).

Despite favorable attitudes, inclusive implementation remains constrained by class size, workload, limited coaching, and fragmented policy structures (Graham et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2023; Villarama et al., 2025). MTSS/SEL integration is uneven, with gaps in data use, fidelity monitoring, and collaboration (Larkin et al., 2022; Pogé & Xiao, 2023). Few

classroom-level indicators directly capture inclusivity, limiting continuous improvement (Mok et al., 2023; Nava et al., 2024). Equity lenses, especially on intersectionality of disability, language, gender, and socioeconomic status, remain underrepresented in teacher accounts (Gkaintartzi & Skourtou, 2021; Murillo & Román, 2023).

The Philippine landscape is defined by Republic Act No. 11650, mandating the conversion of Special Education Centers into Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs). These hubs provide multidisciplinary support to learners with disabilities (LWDs) within the general education system (Republic Act No. 11650, 2022). As of 2026, 32 centers have been converted, but operationalization is hindered by shortages of allied health professionals (EDCOM II, 2025). The 2026 General Appropriations Act reflects record investment in inclusive programs, including ₱1.04 billion for Special Needs Education, ₱209 million for ILRCs, ₱897 million for Alternative Learning Systems, ₱154 million for Indigenous Peoples Education, and ₱521.62 million for Madrasah Education (Gatchalian, 2026; Philippine News Agency, 2026; Manila Standard, 2026). Yet oversight reports highlight a massive "identification gap": only 8% of an estimated 5.1 million children with disabilities are enrolled, with 62% identified informally by teachers rather than clinical assessments (EDCOM II, 2025). Consequently, 75% of these learners are mainstreamed into regular classes where teachers often lack training to implement Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) effectively (EDCOM II, 2026).

DepEd Order No. 020, s. 2025, altered the medium of instruction for Kindergarten to Grade 3, discontinuing mandatory Mother Tongue instruction in favor of Filipino and English, while retaining local languages as auxiliary tools (Department of Education, 2025). For Indigenous Peoples and Muslim learners, translanguaging ensures cultural identity is preserved alongside literacy standards. To address specialist shortages, ₱182 million was allotted for scholarships in Master's degrees for Guidance Counseling, Psychology, and Special

Needs Education, aiming to staff Schools Division Offices with multidisciplinary expertise (EDCOM II, 2026).

Taken together, these developments highlight progress and persistent challenges. Few studies capture how teachers enact inclusivity daily—through lesson design, feedback, discipline, and peer mediation—or link these practices to learning and mental health (Arquero et al., 2024; Graham et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2023). Few concurrently measure engagement and wellbeing, and validated classroom-level indicators remain scarce (Mok et al., 2023; Nava et al., 2024). Teacher strategies for overlapping identities are underexplored, particularly in public schools (Reyes et al., 2023; Capulong & Hernandez, 2022). Thus, there is a pressing need to map how professional development, coaching, leadership, and data routines enable sustainable inclusive practice, and to generate locally grounded, culturally sensitive accounts (Krammer et al., 2022; Larkin et al., 2022; Gkaintartzi & Skourtou, 2021; Murillo & Román, 2023).

Statement of the Problem. This study investigates how public-school teachers in the Philippines understand, enact, and experience inclusivity in their classrooms. Specifically, it explores strategies teachers use to foster inclusive culture, perceived impacts on student engagement and wellbeing, and challenges and supports shaping implementation. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the demographic and professional characteristics of public-school teachers who participated?

2. What recurring themes emerged from teacher interviews regarding inclusive education?

3. What insights can be drawn from documented practices and identified needs?

4. How do student perspectives from focus group discussions shape teachers'

understanding of inclusive practices and current needs?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative survey analysis with qualitative thematic exploration. The quantitative component provided descriptive statistics on teachers' familiarity, perceptions, and observed practices of inclusivity, while the qualitative component applied Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis to interpret teacher narratives and focus group discussions. This design allowed both breadth and depth: numerical trends highlighted general patterns, while thematic analysis captured the richness of teachers' and students' experiences. Survey results informed the analysis of themes emerging from semi-structured interviews and FGDs, enabling integration of insights on current practices and implications for learning and mental health.

Sampling Technique. Convenience sampling was employed to select participants based on availability and willingness, a practical and cost-effective approach often used in exploratory studies with limited resources. However, it is prone to bias since the sample may not represent the entire population. As Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) explain, convenience sampling involves "taking samples from people who are conveniently available" and is frequently chosen when time and access constraints exist. In this study, it was particularly relevant given the heavy workloads of public-school teachers.

Purposive sampling complemented this approach by deliberately selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. This method is common in qualitative research, where depth of information is prioritized over breadth. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposive sampling ensures that selected individuals are knowledgeable about or experienced with the topic of interest. Criteria included: (1) public

school teachers with at least five years of teaching experience, and (2) familiarity with inclusive education. Together, convenience and purposive sampling balanced practicality and depth, enabling broad survey participation and detailed insights from interviews. This method supported the exploratory nature of the study by allowing survey responses to inform interviews and FGDs.

Research Participants. Participants included 28 public school teachers from selected urban and semi-urban areas in the Philippines, primarily Parañaque, Dasmariñas, Manila, Silang, and Baler. They represented diverse subject areas, such as English, MAPEH, Values Education, Social Sciences, TLE-ICT, and Filipino, and taught across grade levels from kindergarten to senior high school. Ages ranged from 25 to 56, with most in their early to mid-30s. The majority identified as female, reflecting the gendered composition of the teaching workforce.

Additionally, 6 public school students participated in FGDs to provide perspectives on inclusion and exclusion within the current system. The participants (mean age = 17) included three males and three females, with perceived experiences related to mental health conditions, gender, and other identity factors. Parental consent and student assent were obtained, and the class adviser was present during the discussion. While 8 teachers, taken from the 28 participants, were subjected for semi-structured interviews.

Research Instruments. Data were collected using a structured survey distributed electronically. Items included demographics (age, gender, city, grade level, subject area), closed-ended measures of familiarity with inclusivity, self-rated knowledge of inclusive strategies, perceived impact on learning and mental health, and frequency of observed practices. Open-ended items elicited definitions of inclusivity.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and FGDs, guided by instruments validated by 3 professionals in mental health, education, and special education. These guides captured measurable indicators and narrative accounts, including examples of inclusive practices, perceived challenges, and recommendations.

Data Collection Procedures. Surveys were distributed via institutional networks and professional contacts. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained. Eight teachers consented to interviews, while six students joined FGDs. Data were anonymized to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, distributions), with visualizations such as bar and pie charts illustrating demographic composition and practice patterns. Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Themes were integrated into narrative discussion, supported by direct quotations and linked to existing literature.

Ethical Considerations. Informed consent was obtained from teachers and parents of student participants, with assent from students. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymization and secure storage. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. Sensitive issues raised during interviews and FGDs were handled with care, with referral information provided when necessary. Privacy and confidentiality were observed throughout, and participants received monetary and food tokens as appreciation.

RESULTS

Summary of Demographic Analysis. Respondents of the study ranged from 25 to 56 years old, with a median age of 33. The majority were in their early to mid-30s, representing a relatively experienced cohort with 6–13 years of teaching experience. Out of 28 respondents, 85% identified as female, 10% as male, and 5% as bisexual, reflecting the gendered composition

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of the Philippine teaching workforce. Most participants were based in urban centers such as Parañaque, Dasmariñas, Manila, and Silang, with a few from smaller municipalities like Baler. This urban concentration may influence access to training and resources. Teachers primarily handled Grades 7–12, though some taught elementary levels and kindergarten, ensuring representation across basic and secondary education. Subjects taught included English, MAPEH, Values Education, Social Sciences, TLE-ICT, Filipino, and Science, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of inclusivity, particularly in areas engaging identity, expression, and wellbeing.

Table 1
Familiarity in the Concept of Inclusivity

Response Type	Count	Percentage
Very familiar	12	42.90%
Somewhat familiar	16	57.10%
Total Responses	**28**	**100%**

Quantitative analysis revealed several patterns regarding inclusivity. Most respondents rated their familiarity with the term "culture of inclusivity" positively (Table 1), indicating general awareness but uneven depth of understanding. Self-assessed knowledge of inclusive teaching strategies ranged from "fair" to "excellent," suggesting commitment but variable confidence in implementation. Definitions of inclusivity clustered around five themes (Table 2): (1) Disability and Special Needs, highlighting awareness of mandates and differentiated instruction; (2) Language and Cultural Diversity, reflecting multilingualism and multiculturalism in classrooms; (3) Socioeconomic Differences, acknowledging poverty and resource gaps as barriers to participation; (4) Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing, linking inclusivity to psychological safety and SEL frameworks; and (5) Gender and Identity, emphasizing gender equity, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and anti-discrimination efforts. These themes demonstrate that teachers conceptualize inclusivity encompassing academic, cultural, and psychosocial dimension.

Table 2
Teacher's Definition of Inclusivity

Theme	Description
Disability and Special Needs	Supporting learners with varied physical/emotional needs
Language and Cultural Diversity	Embracing multilingual and multicultural classrooms
Socioeconomic Differences	Addressing poverty and resource gaps
Mental Health and Well-being	Promoting emotional safety and psychological support
Gender and Identity	Respecting gender diversity and identity-based inclusion

Teachers overwhelmingly perceived inclusivity as beneficial. Over 80% reported that inclusive classrooms positively impact student learning outcomes, enhancing engagement, participation, and performance. This aligns with Capulong and Hernandez (2022) and Mok et al. (2023), who found that differentiated instruction and UDL improve outcomes. Respondents also agreed that inclusivity supports mental health, reducing anxiety and fostering confidence, echoing Liu et al. (2022) and Reyes et al. (2023), who highlight SEL and culturally responsive practices as protective factors. Despite these affirmations, observed frequency of inclusive practices are varied: some reported "always," while others selected "often," "sometimes," or "rarely." This variability reflects uneven implementation emphasizing the need and requirement for whole-school coherence (Lynch et al., 2023).

Educators described diverse inclusive practices. Differentiated instruction was common, with tasks adapted to diverse needs. Inclusive language, such as gender-neutral terms and correct name pronunciation, was emphasized. Accessible materials included visual aids, large-print worksheets, and mother tongue instruction. Participation-focused activities like group work and open discussions were widely used. SEL routines promoting respect, empathy, and teamwork were central, ensuring students felt valued. These practices illustrate teachers' efforts to embed inclusivity into pedagogy and classroom culture.

Persistent challenges were identified. Limited resources, including funding, assistive tools, and inclusive materials, constrained implementation. Large class sizes hindered individualized attention, while cultural resistance, such as traditions and conformity pressures, posed barriers. Teachers noted insufficient training, particularly in handling learners with special needs, and highlighted uninvolved stakeholders, including minimal parental cooperation and weak administrative support. These challenges mirror Murillo and Román (2023), who emphasize equity gaps in resource-constrained contexts.

To strengthen inclusivity, teachers advocated for capacity-building. Professional development on differentiated instruction, inclusive classroom management, and strategies for diverse learners was prioritized. Practical resources such as step-by-step modules, assistive technologies, and culturally responsive materials were deemed essential. Collaborative opportunities, including Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions and expert-led workshops, were recommended. Teachers stressed that training should be hands-on and context-specific, rather than purely theoretical.

The perceived benefits of inclusivity were consistently powerful. Respondents emphasized that inclusivity fosters belonging, allowing students to feel seen, heard, and valued. This boosts confidence, self-esteem, and participation, while promoting empathy and respect for differences. Inclusive environments were described as transformative, supporting both academic success and holistic wellbeing.

Finally, educators recommended regular training in special education and SEL, implementation of inclusive policies such as anti-bullying measures, and improved facilities—accessible classrooms, clean water, internet, and medical services. Stronger stakeholder engagement was urged, involving parents, counselors, and community partners. Teachers also underscored the importance of supporting educators themselves, addressing workload and emotional wellbeing.

In summary, demographic and survey data reveal strong belief in the value of inclusivity and its benefits for learning and mental health. However, systemic support through training, resources, and policy clarity is needed to ensure inclusive practices are consistently and effectively implemented across Philippine public schools.

Semi-Structured Interview among Selected Teachers. Out of 28 respondents, only 8 teachers qualified and participated in the semi-structured interview focusing on a deeper understanding of the experiences, practices, and observations of the culture of inclusive education. The dataset comprised survey and interview transcripts from public school teachers across different grade levels and subject areas. Teachers provided definitions of inclusivity, examples of practices, perceived impacts on learning and mental health, challenges, and recommendations. Reading and re-reading the transcripts allowed immersion in the language teachers used phrases such as "no one left behind," "safe and respectful space," and *"lahat kasali, kasali lahat"* were recurrent and became sensitizing concepts. Responses were coded inductively, focusing on semantic content. Codes were clustered into broader candidate themes. Themes were checked against the dataset to ensure coherence. For example, "Inclusivity as relational and cultural acceptance" was supported by multiple teachers describing inclusivity as respect, fairness, and belonging. "Challenges and systemic constraints" was validated by repeated references to large class sizes, lack of training, and inadequate facilities.

Teaching Background and Diversity of Contexts. Educators reported a wide range of teaching experiences, from early childhood and elementary to senior high school and tertiary education. Subjects taught include Mathematics, Social Sciences, Business, MAPEH/PE, and Araling Panlipunan. Many respondents have over a decade of experience, while others are relatively new to the profession. Across schools, student populations are described as diverse in

language, culture, socioeconomic status, and abilities, with some schools serving thousands of learners from multiple municipalities or regions. The diversity of teaching backgrounds reflects the breadth of inclusivity challenges. Teachers in large, heterogeneous schools face systemic demands, while those in specialized contexts (e.g., science high schools, SPED integration) highlight the need for tailored strategies.

Table 3
Emergent Themes from the Interviews (Teachers)

Theme	Description	Sample Phrases
Teaching Background	Diverse grade levels, subjects, and years of experience	*"26 years teaching Grade 3 Math", "13 years in MAPEH/PE"*
Conceptualizations of Inclusivity	Acceptance, belonging, equitable opportunities	*"Every learner belongs", "Acceptance under Code of Conduct"*
School Culture	Varies from passive to proactive practices	*"Passively practiced", "Differentiated instruction, cultural celebrations"*
Strategies and Routines	Differentiation, accessible materials, inclusive language	*"Tiered tasks", "Mother tongue instruction", "People-First Language"*
Impact on Students	Engagement, confidence, empathy, reduced anxiety	*"No child left behind", "Safe and supportive environment"*
Impact on Teachers	Fulfillment, reduced stress, but systemic challenges	*"Exhausted", "Sense of purpose"*
Challenges	Resource gaps, class size, cultural preconceptions, lack of training	*"Limited resources", "Religion and culture", "Large class sizes"*
Support Needed	Training, resources, leadership, collaboration	*"Inclusive modules", "Assistive tools", "School leadership support"*
Policy and Leadership	Influence through codes, DepEd Orders, enforcement	*"School Code of Conduct", "DepEd Order crafted by experts"*
Recommendations & Advice	Stronger policies, teacher training, empathy, self-care	*"Campaigns on safe learning", "Value every learner"*

Conceptualizations of Inclusivity. Definitions of inclusivity consistently emphasize acceptance, belonging, and equitable opportunities. Teachers describe inclusivity as ensuring that every learner feels valued, respected, and supported regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, ability, or cultural background. Some frame inclusivity as compliance with institutional codes of conduct, while others see it as a moral and pedagogical imperative. Inclusivity is understood both as a policy-driven requirement and a personal teaching philosophy. This dual framing suggests that while institutional codes provide structure, teachers' values and practices ultimately shape classroom culture.

School Culture and Practices. Respondents noted inclusivity is sometimes reactive, addressed only when issues arise, while others described proactive efforts like differentiated instruction, cultural celebrations, and mainstreaming learners with special needs. Examples included group activities, modified sports, and stereotype-challenging discussions. School cultures vary widely, with teachers' individual efforts often compensating systemic gaps.

Strategies and Routines for Inclusivity. Common strategies include: Differentiated instruction (tiered tasks, flexible grouping, alternative assessments); Accessible materials (visual aids, large-print worksheets, mother tongue instruction); Inclusive language (gender-neutral terms, People-First Language); Positive discipline and classroom routines (respectful communication, group reflections); and Relationship-building (trust between teacher-student and empathy among peers). Teachers rely heavily on pedagogical flexibility and relationship-centered approaches to foster inclusivity. These strategies highlight the importance of both instructional design and emotional climate.

Impact on Students. Educators consistently reported that inclusivity: Boosts engagement, confidence, and self-esteem; reduces stress and anxiety; promotes empathy, cooperation, and respect among peers; and enables learners to overcome challenges (e.g., struggling readers succeeding through group projects, hesitant students gaining confidence through adapted tasks). Inclusivity is seen as transformative, not only improving academic performance but also enhancing mental health and social development. Teachers view inclusivity as essential for holistic growth.

Impact on Teachers. Teachers described inclusivity as personally fulfilling, reducing stress, and motivating professional growth. However, challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources, cultural preconceptions, and lack of training often leave them exhausted or under-equipped. Inclusivity positively affects teacher wellbeing when supported, but systemic barriers can undermine sustainability. Teacher support is therefore critical to maintaining inclusive practices.

Challenges and Needed Support. The following are the perceived key challenges: Resource

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gaps (assistive tools, facilities, funding); large class sizes and diverse needs; cultural and religious preconceptions; limited training in SPED and differentiated strategies; and inconsistent policies or lack of enforcement. On the other hand, the following are the needed support: ongoing professional development (inclusive pedagogy, classroom management, SPED); access to resources (assistive technologies, culturally diverse materials); strong school leadership and policies (equity-focused, anti-discrimination); and collaboration with parents and communities. Teachers are clear about what they need—training, resources, and leadership support. Without these, inclusivity risks being superficial or reactive.

Policy and Leadership Influence. Educators highlighted the role of DepEd Orders, Codes of Conduct, and school leadership in shaping inclusivity. Supportive policies and leaders enable teachers to adapt lessons and prioritize inclusivity, while weak enforcement or unclear guidelines hinder progress. Policy frameworks are necessary but insufficient; leadership commitment and monitoring are crucial for meaningful implementation.

Recommendations and Advice. Teachers envision inclusivity as a whole-school, whole-community effort. Their advice emphasizes patience, empathy, and self-care, underscoring the relational and emotional dimensions of inclusive teaching such as systemic changes: stronger policies, consistent enforcement, campaigns for safe learning environments; teacher training: continuous, practical, and context-specific; school-wide initiatives: cultural celebrations, anti-bullying programs, inclusive facilities; advice to new teachers: value every learner, build safe and supportive environments, foster empathy, and care for personal wellbeing.

The dataset portrays committed educators navigating systemic constraints. Inclusivity is deeply valued and enacted through differentiated instruction, relationship-building, and cultural sensitivity. However, challenges such as resource shortages, large class sizes, and inconsistent policies limit effectiveness. Teachers consistently called for ongoing training, stronger leadership, and systemic reforms to ensure inclusivity becomes a lived reality rather than a compliance requirement.

Teachers' narratives reveal that inclusivity is closely tied to student wellbeing, engagement, and equity, though implementation remains uneven. Respondents described inclusivity as fostering belonging, confidence, and reduced anxiety, resonating with Axelsson (2021), who found that inclusive classrooms enhance wellbeing when diverse identities are validated. Wong and Lim (2020) similarly emphasize that inclusive climates and strong teacher-student relationships reduce stress. Yet, teachers noted that inclusivity is often "passively practiced," addressed only when issues arise, highlighting gaps between potential and fidelity.

Teacher-led practices such as differentiated instruction, accessible materials, and inclusive language were frequently cited. These align with Capulong and Hernandez (2022), who found that inclusive practices in Philippine schools increase engagement, and Mok, Cheung, and Chan (2023), who demonstrate that Universal Design for Learning boosts outcomes. However, many teachers admitted lacking formal training, echoing Pogé and Xiao (2023), who argue that teacher self-efficacy depends on professional development. Without structured training, inclusivity risks being uneven and dependent on individual initiative.

Language and cultural sensitivity emerged as critical themes. Respectful language, mother tongue instruction, and cultural responsiveness reflect Gkaintartzi and Skourtou (2021), who show that multilingual pedagogies strengthen identity and participation. Villanueva and Cruz (2021) highlight similar practices in Philippine classrooms, while Tan (2020) and Reyes, Dizon, and Santos (2023) reinforce that culturally responsive inclusion enhances wellbeing. Yet, negative staff attitudes and conformity pressures were noted, underscoring Graham, Truscott, and Cologon's (2020) argument that

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inclusivity requires whole-school belonging, not just classroom-level practices.

Relationships were consistently described as central. Trust-building and peer empathy fostered safe environments, aligning with Fronius et al. (2020) and Larkin, Thorsborne, and Blood (2022), who show restorative practices improve climate and reduce referrals. Murillo & Román (2023) argue that inclusive discipline enhances fairness. However, reliance on emotional labor raises sustainability concerns, echoing Lynch, O'Keeffe, and McGlynn (2023), who stress leadership and professional learning to support teachers.

Challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources, and lack of training were repeatedly cited, consistent with Murillo and Román (2023). Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin (2021) stress professional learning, while Nava, Gómez, and Pérez (2024) call for classroom-level measurement tools. Philippine policies such as RA 11650 and DepEd Memorandum No. 043 (2025) signal national commitment, but teachers' narratives reveal implementation gaps. Without adequate resources, inclusivity risks remaining rhetorical.

Teachers recommended continuous training, improved facilities, stakeholder engagement, and stronger policies. These align with global evidence on professional learning (Sharma et al., 2021; Lynch et al., 2023), culturally responsive practices (Reyes et al., 2023; Tan, 2020), restorative approaches (Fronius et al., 2020; Santos & Valenzuela, 2022), and UDL (Mok et al., 2023). The convergence between teacher recommendations and scholarship suggests awareness of solutions, but systemic capacity-building is essential.

In sum, educators view inclusivity as essential for wellbeing, engagement, and equity. Their practices mirror global evidence, but systemic barriers constrain implementation. Philippine reforms provide a foundation, yet inclusivity remains uneven and aspirational. Moving forward, systemic support must deepen to shift inclusivity from compliance to culture.

Focus Group Discussion. Students initially described their school experiences as generally welcoming, noting that they often feel included in classroom activities. When asked about the word inclusivity, they defined it as catering to specific needs, respecting differences, and "feeling as one with others." This definition reflects a relational understanding of inclusivity but also shows that their conceptualization is limited to visible accommodations rather than broader aspects such as mental health, ethnicity, or language.

Most students reported feeling welcome in their classrooms, citing examples of teachers adjusting tasks for physically handicapped students during PE classes. However, challenges were also shared. One student recounted a transgender classmate who had to transfer schools after being prohibited from cross-dressing, highlighting how inclusivity is not consistently practiced. Others mentioned difficulties faced by parents of students with special needs, suggesting systemic gaps in support.

Students emphasized that feeling included boosts their motivation to learn, while exclusion diminishes confidence and participation. They observed that inclusive practices, such as differentiated tasks or supportive teacher behavior, encourage them to engage more actively in class. Conversely, when inclusivity is absent, students reported hesitations and reduced willingness to participate, with some visibly pausing when asked about their true experiences.

Students acknowledged that inclusivity directly affects their stress levels, confidence, and sense of belonging. They expressed that teachers play a crucial role in supporting mental health through inclusive practices, noting that they feel safe with their teachers. However, they also admitted limited awareness that inclusivity extends to mental health, gender, ethnicity, and language. This gap suggests that inclusivity is often understood narrowly, focusing on physical or visible accommodations. Participants identified

several challenges: inconsistent implementation of inclusivity across schools and divisions; limited training programs on Gender and Development, with uneven application depending on school leadership; and lack of proactive initiatives from school administration, with inclusivity often confined to subjects like Personal Development rather than embedded in daily routines.

Table 4
Emergent Themes from the FGD (Students)

FGD Question	Sample Student Response	Initial Code	Theme
What comes to mind when you hear the word "inclusivity"?	"Inclusivity means catering to specific needs, differences, and feeling as one with others."	Inclusivity as acceptance and belonging	Inclusivity as Belonging and Acceptance
In what ways do you feel included in your classroom or school?	"We feel welcome in our classrooms."	Feeling welcomed	Inclusivity as Belonging and Acceptance
Can you share an example of a time when you felt excluded?	"A classmate had to transfer because they were not allowed to cross-dress."	Gender-based exclusion	Barriers to inclusivity
How do teachers or classmates show inclusivity in everyday school life?	"During PE, the teacher made a different task for a physically handicapped student."	Accommodation for disability	Pedagogical Strategies for Inclusivity
How does feeling included (or excluded) affect your motivation to learn?	"When teachers adjust tasks, I feel more motivated to participate."	Inclusion boosts motivation	Engagement and Academic Outcomes
How does inclusivity affect your feelings of stress, confidence, or belonging?	"We feel safe with our teachers."	Teacher support reduces stress	Mental Health and Psychosocial Safety
What challenges do you see in making schools more inclusive?	"School administration does not necessarily observe inclusivity practices."	Lack of administrative support	Barriers to inclusivity
What suggestions would you give to teachers or school leaders?	"We wish the school would take more proactive steps."	Desire for proactive leadership	Pathways to Improvement
If you could change one thing in your school to make it more inclusive, what would it be?	"Hindi namin ramdam yung ganoon." (We don't really feel it.)	Limited visibility of inclusivity	Barriers to inclusivity

Students recommended that schools take more proactive steps, including clearer policies, consistent training, and leadership accountability. They expressed a desire for inclusivity to be felt more tangibly, stating *"hindi namin ramdam yung ganoon"* (we don't really feel it). In closing, students reiterated that while they feel safe with their teachers, they wish for stronger institutional commitment to inclusivity. They emphasized that inclusivity should not only be reactive or subject-specific but embedded in everyday school culture. Their reflections highlight both the progress made and the gaps that remain, particularly in addressing diverse identities and ensuring equitable participation.

Inclusivity as Belonging and Acceptance.
Students consistently defined inclusivity as "catering to specific needs, respecting differences, and feeling as one with others." They described feeling welcome in their classrooms, noting that teachers often made efforts to ensure participation. This sense of belonging was central to their understanding of inclusivity, though their definitions tended to emphasize visible accommodations rather than broader aspects such as mental health, ethnicity, or language. The emphasis on

belonging echoes Graham et al. (2020), who highlight that inclusion is most meaningful when students feel relationally accepted.

Pedagogical Strategies for Inclusivity.
Participants shared examples of teachers adapting lessons and activities to meet diverse needs. One student recounted how a PE teacher created alternative tasks for a physically handicapped classmate, allowing them to participate meaningfully. Such practices reflect differentiated instruction and responsive pedagogy, aligning with Mok et al. (2023), who found that flexible teaching strategies enhance engagement in inclusive classrooms. However, students also noted that inclusivity was often confined to specific subjects like Personal Development, rather than embedded across the curriculum.

Torres and Molina (2021) investigated inclusive co-teaching models and emphasized the importance of role clarity between general and special education teachers. Their findings showed that when responsibilities are clearly defined—such as who leads instruction, who provides support, and how decisions are shared—co-teaching leads to stronger outcomes for both students and teachers. Inclusive co-teaching was found to improve classroom climate, foster collaboration, and enhance student engagement, particularly for learners with diverse needs. Conversely, lack of clarity often resulted in confusion, uneven workload distribution, and reduced effectiveness. The study highlights that successful co-teaching requires not only shared values of inclusivity but also structured collaboration and leadership support.

Engagement and Academic Outcomes.
Students emphasized that feeling included directly affected their motivation to learn. They reported greater participation and confidence when teachers adjusted tasks or encouraged collaboration. Conversely, exclusion diminished their willingness to engage, with some students visibly pausing when asked about their true experiences. This finding resonates with Capulong & Hernandez (2022), who

demonstrated that inclusive practices in Philippine high schools significantly improve student engagement, and with Rojas (2021), who found that belonging interventions increase classroom participation.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Safety. Students acknowledged that inclusivity influences their stress levels, confidence, and sense of belonging. They expressed that teachers play a crucial role in supporting mental health, noting that they generally feel safe with their teachers. However, they admitted limited awareness that inclusivity extends to mental health, gender, ethnicity, and language. This gap suggests that inclusivity is often understood narrowly, focusing on physical or visible accommodations. The findings align with Liu et al. (2022), who showed that SEL-integrated practices reduce anxiety and foster wellbeing, and with Reyes et al. (2023), who emphasized culturally responsive inclusion as protective for Filipino students.

Barriers to Inclusivity. Despite positive experiences, students identified significant challenges. They recounted exclusionary incidents, such as a transgender classmate being forced to transfer schools after being prohibited from cross-dressing. They also observed difficulties faced by parents of students with special needs and noted that school administrations did not consistently implement inclusivity practices. One student remarked, *"hindi namin ramdam yung ganoon"* (we don't really feel it), underscoring the perceived gap between policy rhetoric and lived experience. These barriers reflect systemic issues, including uneven leadership support and cultural preconceptions, consistent with Lynch et al. (2023) and Murillo & Román (2023).

Pathways to Improvement. Students recommended more proactive steps from schools, including clearer policies, consistent training, and stronger leadership accountability. They acknowledged existing Gender and Development training programs but noted that implementation varied depending on school heads and divisions. They expressed a desire

for inclusivity to be embedded in everyday routines rather than confined to specific subjects. This aligns with Sharma et al. (2021), who emphasize the importance of sustained professional development, and with Larkin et al. (2022), who highlight leadership fidelity as critical for inclusive practice.

Taken together, the FGD results reveal that students value inclusivity as belonging and acceptance, observe positive impacts on learning and wellbeing, and recognize teachers' efforts to adapt pedagogy. However, they also highlight systemic barriers, these are uneven implementation, cultural biases, and limited administrative support, that hinder inclusivity from becoming a lived reality. Their recommendations point to the need for proactive leadership, consistent training, and culturally responsive practices to ensure inclusivity is felt across all aspects of school life.

Researcher's Reflection. Findings affirm that inclusivity is both a pedagogical and psychosocial imperative. Teachers conceptualize it as relational belonging, enact it through differentiated and culturally responsive strategies, and observe positive impacts on engagement and wellbeing. Yet systemic barriers, such as resources, training, and policy coherence, limit consistent implementation. These results echo global and Philippine literature, reinforcing that inclusive education requires professional development (Sharma et al., 2021), validated tools (Nava et al., 2024), and culturally grounded practices (Reyes et al., 2023; Tan, 2020). Teachers' voices call for a shift from aspirational rhetoric to embedded practice that centers student dignity, teacher agency, and institutional accountability. The researcher's engagement with teacher narratives highlighted tensions between personal commitment and systemic constraints. Educators consistently articulated inclusivity as acceptance, belonging, and equitable opportunities, echoing scholarship on wellbeing (Axelsson, 2021; Graham et al., 2020). Yet lived realities revealed fragility when resources and leadership support were

insufficient. Teachers framed inclusivity both as compliance with DepEd Orders and as a personal philosophy rooted in empathy, reflecting literature that positions inclusion as policy-driven and relational (Republic Act No. 11650, 2022; Rojas, 2021). School culture emerged as pivotal. Some schools embedded inclusivity into routines, while others adopted reactive approaches, resonating with studies on climate and equity (Murillo & Román, 2023; Wang & Degol, 2020). Reported impacts, such as greater engagement, confidence, empathy, and reduced anxiety, mirror SEL research (Liu et al., 2022) and belonging interventions (Smith & Barr, 2020). Teachers also noted their own wellbeing, balancing fulfillment with exhaustion, echoing studies on self-efficacy (Krammer et al., 2022; Pogé & Xiao, 2023). Challenges such as resource gaps, large classes, and cultural preconceptions aligned with Murillo and Román (2023) and Tran & Nguyen (2022). Policy commitments (EDCOM II, 2025; Gatchalian, 2026) show political will, yet gaps persist between policy and practice. Ultimately, inclusivity in Philippine schools is at a crossroads: teachers are committed, policies are emerging, but systemic support must deepen to move from compliance to culture.

DISCUSSION

Teachers provided concrete examples of inclusivity in practice. One recounted discussions on gender stereotypes that allowed learners to express views freely, while another described modifying team activities so students of varying skill levels could participate equally. Others highlighted differentiated instruction, mother tongue integration, and gender-neutral language. These strategies boosted engagement, reduced anxiety, and encouraged academic risk-taking. Teachers observed that when students feel safe and accepted, they are more willing to participate, express themselves, and persist in tasks.

Responses underscored the strong connection between inclusivity and mental health. Teachers noted that inclusive practices reduce stress, build confidence, and promote psychological

safety. They also recognized positive effects on their own wellbeing, finding fulfillment in seeing students supported. However, inclusivity was often enacted through individual initiative rather than systemic support, pointing to the need for professional development, adequate facilities, and policy coherence. Recommendations included training on differentiated instruction, inclusive classroom management, and strategies for diverse learners, alongside clearer anti-discrimination guidelines and equity-focused policies.

Teachers and students described inclusivity as ensuring learners feel valued and supported. Students defined it as "catering to specific needs, respecting differences, and feeling as one with others." This relational emphasis echoes Graham, Truscott, and Cologon (2020), who argue that inclusion is most meaningful when students experience acceptance within diverse communities. Yet both groups tended to conceptualize inclusivity narrowly, focusing on visible accommodations for disabilities while overlooking broader dimensions such as mental health, ethnicity, and language. This gap reflects Reyes, Dizon, and Santos (2023), who highlight the need for culturally responsive inclusion in Philippine schools.

Pedagogical strategies were central to inclusivity. Differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, and accessible materials allowed meaningful participation. Students recounted how PE teachers modified activities for physically handicapped classmates, boosting motivation and confidence. These practices align with Mok, Cheung, and Chan (2023), who found that Universal Design for Learning enhances engagement and assessment outcomes. Yet inclusivity was often confined to specific subjects rather than embedded across curricula, underscoring Lynch, O'Keeffe, and McGlynn's (2023) argument that inclusivity must be systemic and supported by leadership.

Findings highlight direct links between inclusivity and student engagement. Teachers reported increased participation and confidence, while students described greater

motivation when tasks were adjusted or collaboration encouraged. Conversely, exclusion diminished willingness to engage. These results resonate with Capulong and Hernandez (2022), Rojas (2021), and Yeung & McInerney (2020), who found that inclusive climates foster persistence and motivation. Sison and Teng (2024) similarly showed that inclusive routines strengthen academic persistence among Philippine junior high students.

Beyond academics, inclusivity was seen as central to psychosocial safety. Students acknowledged reduced stress and anxiety, while teachers described inclusivity as protective for wellbeing. These findings align with Liu, Taylor, and Oberle (2022) and Wong & Lim (2020), who emphasize SEL integration and belonging as critical to mental health. Yet systemic inequities persist, consistent with Murillo & Román (2023). Students' remark that "hindi namin ramdam yung ganoon" reflects the disconnect between policy rhetoric and lived experience, echoing Zulueta & Ramos (2025).

Both groups emphasized policy and leadership. Teachers noted that DepEd Orders and leadership support shaped their ability to implement inclusivity, while students observed inconsistent application across schools. This reflects Lynch et al. (2023) and Tran & Nguyen (2022), who highlight leadership fidelity in multi-tiered systems of support. Philippine reforms such as RA 11650 and DepEd Memorandum No. 043 (2025) provide a strong foundation, but gaps in implementation remain.

Finally, teachers and students recommended continuous training, improved facilities, stakeholder engagement, and stronger leadership accountability. These align with Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin (2021) and Larkin, Thorsborne, and Blood (2022), who emphasize sustained professional development and leadership fidelity. Taken together, perspectives reinforce global scholarship: inclusivity fosters belonging, engagement, and wellbeing, but systemic barriers prevent it from becoming a lived reality. Philippine schools are at a crossroads – teachers and students are committed, policies are emerging, but systemic support must deepen to move inclusivity from compliance to culture.

Conclusion. This study affirms that inclusive education in Philippine schools is widely valued by both teachers and students, who consistently associate it with belonging, acceptance, and equitable participation. Teachers implement practices such as differentiated instruction, accessible materials, and relationship-centered approaches, while students recognize these efforts as boosting motivation, confidence, and wellbeing. However, inclusivity is often narrowly understood—focused on visible accommodations for disabilities—while broader dimensions such as mental health, gender, ethnicity, and language remain underemphasized. Inclusivity in Philippine schools is at a critical juncture: teachers and students are committed, policies are emerging, but systemic support must deepen to move from compliance-driven initiatives to a lived school culture that fosters holistic wellbeing.

Recommendations. At the policy level, leadership accountability and fidelity are essential. DepEd Orders and Republic Act No. 11650 must be operationalized with monitoring mechanisms and adequate resources to ensure inclusivity is actively practiced (Larkin, Thorsborne, & Blood, 2022; Murillo & Román, 2023). Support systems for students and families should be expanded, including accessible resources for parents and strengthened counseling services to address mental health (Liu, Taylor, & Oberle, 2022). Institutionalized tools such as the Classroom Inclusivity Index, complemented by student feedback, can monitor inclusivity in daily school life (Nava, Gómez, & Pérez, 2024).

At the school level, restorative and relational approaches should be embedded to improve climate and belonging (Fronius et al., 2020; Santos & Valenzuela, 2022). Inclusivity must be integrated across curricula, supported by Universal Design for Learning frameworks (Lynch, O'Keeffe, & McGlynn, 2023; Mok, Cheung,

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& Chan, 2023). At the classroom level, continuous, hands-on professional development in differentiated instruction and special education strategies is vital (Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2021; Pogé & Xiao, 2023). Culturally and linguistically responsive practices further enhance inclusivity (Gkaintartzi & Skourtou, 2021; Villanueva & Cruz, 2021; Smith & Barr, 2020).

Limitations. Findings are constrained by small sample size, reliance on self-reported data, and descriptive rather than inferential analysis. Absence of longitudinal data limits understanding of changes over time. Future research should expand to regional/national samples and employ explanatory-inferential designs to capture evolving practices.

Artificial intelligence use. AI tool (Microsoft Copilot) supported initial drafting of text; final revisions and accountability rest with the authors.

Ethics approval statement. Ethics approval was not acquired for this study. However, ethical considerations were followed in the conduct of the study, such as acquisition of informed consent, assent were gathered and documented from the participants.

Data availability statement. Due to ethical restrictions, the data are not publicly available but may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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