

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY: APPLIED BUSINESS AND EDUCATION RESEARCH

2025, Vol. 6, No. 7, 3405 – 3412

<http://dx.doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.06.07.16>

Research Article

An Explanatory Case Study on Teachers' Attitudes Toward the Inclusion of Students with Special Needs in Rural Philippine Classrooms

Eunice F. David¹, Philip R. Baldera^{1*}, Icelda D. Ruda¹, Vivian Q. Santos¹, Mary Dean P. Ampon¹, Crisaldo S. Marfil¹, Maria Joan L. Opiana¹, Dejoy R. Perillo¹, Janine Joy A. Fababeir¹, Glorylyn F. Fadri¹, Franklin F. Marquez¹, Apple G. Divinagracia¹, Jenny Vee T. Gadon¹, Teofilo R. Norombaba², Simonette A. Castrence², Ma. Teresa M. Chico²

¹Graduate Education and Professional Studies, Romblon State University, Romblon, 5505, Philippines

²Schools Division Office – Manila, Department of Education, Manila, 1000, Philippines

Article history:

Submission 03 June 2025

Revised 30 June 2025

Accepted 23 July 2025

*Corresponding author:

E-mail:

philipbaldera001@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This explanatory case study examined nine elementary teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education in Odiongan North District, Romblon, between January and June 2025. Guided by the Social Model of Disability, Contact Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the study employed semi-structured, expert-validated focus group discussions, which were thematically analyzed to reveal four interrelated themes: moral and pedagogical motivations; contextual influences; gaps in formal professional development; and lived experiences. Insights informed a seven-module Inclusive Teaching Empowerment Series (ITES) addressing legal frameworks, differentiated instruction, co-teaching, reflective practice, and digital micro-learning. The study highlights the need for sustained, context-responsive capacity building, leadership support, and resource allocation in rural, multigrade settings. Recommendations include integrating ITES into DepEd Learning Action Cells and formal peer-led workshops to scale inclusive practices.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Teacher Attitudes, Rural Settings, Professional Development, Special Needs*

Introduction

Inclusive education, defined as the practice of educating students with diverse abilities within mainstream classrooms, has gained prominence as a global strategy for promoting

equity and social justice (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2021). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) mandates states to provide in-

How to cite:

David, E. F., Baldera, P. R., Ruda, I. D., Santos, V. Q., Ampon, M. D. P., Marfil, C. S., Opiana, M. J. L., Perillo, D. R., Fababeir, J. A., Fadri, G. F., Marquez, F. F., Divinagracia, A. G., Gadon, J. V. T., Norombaba, T. R., Castrence, S. A., & Chico, M. T. M. (2025). An Explanatory Case Study on Teachers' Attitudes Toward the Inclusion of Students with Special Needs in Rural Philippine Classrooms. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*. 6(7), 3405 – 3412. doi: 10.11594/ijmaber.06.07.16

clusive, quality education for persons with disabilities, foregrounding systemic reforms to remove barriers (Rioux & Pinto, 2021). In the Philippines, Republic Act 10533 (2013) and DepEd Orders 72 s. 2009 and 044 s. 2021 institutionalize inclusive education within the K–12 Basic Education Program, emphasizing adaptable pedagogy, individualized supports, and school-based collaboration (Kozibroda, 2020; Madhesh, 2023).

Empirical studies reveal generally positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion when supported by adequate resources, training, and leadership (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer & Pijl, 2021). However, much of this research focuses on urban or well-resourced contexts, limiting its applicability to rural settings (Lindner & Schwab, 2020). In remote areas such as Romblon, challenges include insufficient instructional materials, overcrowded multigrade classes, and limited specialized services (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2021; Alsubaie & Ashwin, 2021). This context intensifies logistical burdens and can negatively affect teacher efficacy and attitudes (Amr *et al.*, 2020; Ulla & Acompanado, 2021).

Personal beliefs—rooted in moral, religious, and empathetic values—also shape inclusive dispositions (Artiles, 2021; Sturm, 2021). Teachers who perceive inclusion as a fundamental human right tend to show a higher level of commitment and adapt instructional strategies more readily (Aldosari, 2022; Haddock & Maio, 2020). Moreover, professional experience with special needs learners enhances confidence and positive attitudes through meaningful engagement (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2021; Yada, Tolvanen & Savolainen, 2021).

School culture and leadership support critically influence teacher readiness. Administrators who foster collaborative climates, allocate resources, and endorse co-teaching models bolster teacher motivation and sustain inclusive practices (Andrews & Du, 2021; Meijer & Watkins, 2020; Webster & Blatchford, 2022). Informal learning via social media and digital microlearning further supplements formal training, offering practical strategies for low-resource classrooms (Bisin & Sumayo, 2024; Scherer *et al.*, 2021).

Professional development that combines experiential workshops, mentorship, and peer collaboration yields positive shifts in teacher attitudes and skillsets (Loreman *et al.*, 2021; Martin & Smith, 2020; Baker & Bourn, 2020). Yet, limited research has examined how these interventions can be optimized for rural, multi-grade contexts in the Philippines (Khan & Hameed, 2020; Gagnon *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, cultural dynamics in small island communities may affect perceptions of disability and inclusion, underscoring the need for localized studies (Alsubaie & Ashwin, 2021; Araujo & Dizon, 2020).

This study addresses these gaps by exploring the attitudes of nine elementary teachers in Odiongan North District, Romblon, guided by the Social Model of Disability, Contact Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior. By examining personal, contextual, and experiential factors, this research seeks to inform context-responsive capacity building, policy refinements, and the design of a tailored Inclusive Teaching Empowerment Series (ITES) for rural multi-grade settings.

Research Objectives

1. To describe elementary teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education in a rural, multi-grade setting.
2. To identify contextual factors—such as resources, school culture, and multigrade demands—that influence these attitudes.
3. To examine teachers' professional development experiences and perceived training needs for inclusive practice.
4. To explore teachers' lived experiences and emotional trajectories in teaching students with special needs.

Methods

This study adopted an explanatory case study approach to understand how elementary teachers in Odiongan North District cultivate and implement inclusive attitudes within their everyday classrooms (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995). Nine teachers were purposively selected—one from each public elementary school in the district—to capture variation in grade level, years of teaching experience (ranging from 3 to 20 years), and geographic setting (coastal vs.

mountain). Following qualitative best practices, a sample of 5–10 cases is deemed sufficient for achieving thematic saturation in homogeneous contexts (Morse, 1995; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Between January and June 2025, data were collected through four semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs), each comprising 2–3 participants. The FGDs were organized to ensure diversity while promoting comfort and openness—teachers were grouped based on shared contextual factors such as geographic location (coastal or mountain schools) and teaching experience (early-career vs. veteran). Each session lasted 60–90 minutes.

An interview guide was developed and underwent expert validation for content relevance and clarity. Three experts in special education and inclusive pedagogy—comprising one university professor, one DepEd supervisor, and one senior SPED practitioner—reviewed the instrument. They evaluated the alignment of the questions with the study objectives and suggested revisions for clarity, appropriateness, and cultural sensitivity. Revisions were incorporated prior to pilot testing and data collection.

All FGD sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by field notes capturing nonverbal cues. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic approach: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and write-up. Two researchers independently coded the transcripts, achieving over 95% agreement; discrepancies were resolved through consensus. Saturation was confirmed when no new themes emerged by the seventh FGD (Guest *et al.*, 2006).

Trustworthiness was ensured through member checks, wherein participants validated the synthesized themes, and through an external audit conducted by a senior qualitative researcher, supported by detailed audit trails documenting analytic decisions.

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Schools Division Office – Romblon. Participants provided written informed consent, and anonymity was maintained

through the use of pseudonyms. All data were securely stored in encrypted, password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

Results

The thematic analysis yielded four major themes that articulate the multifaceted nature of elementary teachers' attitudes toward inclusion: (1) moral and pedagogical motivations; (2) contextual influences; (3) professional development gaps and emergent opportunities; and (4) lived experiences in inclusive classrooms.

Theme 1: Moral and Pedagogical Motivations

Participants universally framed inclusion as a moral imperative. Many invoked religious and ethical rationales—"We are all equal in the eyes of God" (T3)—underscoring an intrinsic duty to support learners with special needs. Pedagogically, teachers described adapting lesson plans, differentiating tasks, and employing multi-sensory strategies to ensure access. Teacher 7 noted, "I modify my materials—simpler texts, visuals, hands-on activities—so every child can participate." This theme highlights that moral convictions and professional self-efficacy coalesce to drive positive dispositions.

Theme 2: Contextual Influences

Subthemes within this category included resource constraints, multigrade teaching demands, and school culture. Teachers reported limited access to specialized materials (e.g., Braille books, manipulatives) and inadequate physical space. "I sometimes have 40 students in one room, two grades together, and only one set of worksheets," shared T2. Multigrade contexts intensified planning burdens, yet some found peer collaboration supportive: "We share ideas in our cluster; one school made tactile aids from recycled materials," explained T5. School leadership's attitude also influenced teacher morale: principals who publicly championed inclusion fostered a more positive climate.

Theme 3: Professional Development Gaps and Emergent Opportunities

While formal workshops on special needs education were sporadic and generic, teachers expressed strong demand for targeted, context-specific training. "Most seminars are urban-focused; they don't address multigrade realities," observed T4. In response to this gap, participants increasingly turned to digital platforms—Facebook teacher groups, TikTok tutorials—for just-in-time strategies. Teacher 9 recounted, "I learned a quick scaffold from a video and immediately applied it in class." These patterns informed the design of the seven-module ITES, ensuring alignment with expressed needs.

Theme 4: Lived Experiences

Emotional rewards and shifts in teacher identity emerged as powerful narratives. Teachers described initial apprehension—"I was afraid I'd harm them with wrong strategies" (T1)—but recounted moments of joy and professional growth. "When a nonverbal child finally responded to my signal, I felt proud and motivated," shared T6. Over time, participants reported evolving self-concepts—from generalist teachers to inclusive advocates—reflecting the sustained impact of hands-on engagement.

To enhance synthesis and clarity, the table below summarizes the four major themes, their subthemes, and selected participant quotes:

Theme	Subthemes	Sample Quotes
1. Moral and Pedagogical Motivations	- Ethical and religious beliefs	"We are all equal in the eyes of God." (T3)
	- Instructional adaptations	"I modify my materials—simpler texts, visuals, hands-on activities—so every child can participate." (T7)
2. Contextual Influences	- Resource constraints	"I sometimes have 40 students in one room, two grades together, and only one set of worksheets." (T2) "We share ideas in our cluster; one school made tactile aids from recycled materials." (T5)
	- Multigrade demands	
	- School leadership and culture	
3. Professional Development Gaps and Opportunities	- Lack of context-specific training	"Most seminars are urban-focused; they don't address multigrade realities." (T4) "I learned a quick scaffold from a video and immediately applied it in class." (T9)
	- Reliance on digital microlearning	
4. Lived Experiences	- Emotional journey	"I was afraid I'd harm them with wrong strategies." (T1) "When a nonverbal child finally responded to my signal, I felt proud and motivated." (T6)
	- Shifting professional identity	

Discussion

The findings of this study provide nuanced insights into the interplay of moral convictions, contextual realities, and professional development experiences that shape elementary teachers' attitudes toward inclusion in rural, multigrade settings. First, the moral and pedagogical motivations theme underscores how intrinsic value systems and ethical beliefs—rooted in both religious worldviews and professional

ideals—serve as powerful catalysts for inclusive practice. This aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), where teachers' normative beliefs (i.e., moral convictions) positively influence their attitudes and intentions toward inclusive behaviors. Previous research corroborates this link, showing that moral reasoning predicts teachers' commitment to inclusion (Aldosari, 2022; Sturm, 2021).

Second, contextual influences highlight the critical role of systemic and environmental factors, consistent with the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1996), which locates barriers to inclusion not within the individual but within societal structures. Resource constraints such as inadequate instructional materials and overcrowded multigrade classrooms impede teachers' ability to implement inclusive strategies (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2021; Ulla & Acompanado, 2021). However, supportive school cultures—manifested through collaborative leadership and peer networks—emerged as enabling forces that buffer these challenges (Andrews & Du, 2021; Meijer & Watkins, 2020).

Third, the professional development gaps theme reveals a disjunction between generic, urban-centered training and the localized needs of rural educators. This gap echoes findings from Khan and Hameed (2020) and Gagnon *et al.* (2021) that underscore the necessity for context-adaptive training modules. Importantly, teachers' resort to informal digital microlearning reflects Contact Theory's emphasis on structured interactions: brief, targeted engagements (e.g., TikTok tutorials, Facebook group discussions) provide scaffolding experiences that gradually shift attitudes and bolster self-efficacy (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2021; Scherer *et al.*, 2021).

Finally, the lived experiences theme illustrates a transformative process: initial apprehension gives way to emotional rewards and evolving professional identities. This trajectory corresponds with both Contact Theory and TPB, as repeated, positive interactions with learners with special needs engender favorable attitudes and enhance perceived behavioral control (Yada, Tolvanen & Savolainen, 2021; Webster & Blatchford, 2022).

Collectively, these themes articulate a multi-layered model of attitude formation and change, wherein moral agency, structural enablers/barriers, and experiential learning coalesce to shape inclusive dispositions. The development of the Inclusive Teaching Empowerment Series (ITES) leverages these insights by addressing legal knowledge, pedagogical skills, collaborative practices, reflective capacity, and digital resourcefulness.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Findings suggest that DepEd should prioritize resource allocation for rural multigrade classrooms, including provision of low-cost assistive materials and infrastructure enhancements. Leadership development programs should train school heads to foster inclusion-oriented cultures. The ITES framework offers a modular blueprint for professional development that can be integrated into existing Learning Action Cells and peer-led workshops.

Directions for Future Research

Further studies could examine ITES implementation and outcomes across varied regional contexts, including urban and secondary schools, to test the model's transferability. Longitudinal research may also track shifts in teacher attitudes over time, assessing the sustainability of training effects and the evolution of professional identities.

Limitations

As noted, purposive sampling within a singular rural district may limit generalizability. Self-selection bias and social desirability effects in FGDs may have influenced participants' responses. Nevertheless, rigorous trustworthiness measures—member checking, external audit, and triangulation—enhance confidence in the findings.

Additionally, ethical sensitivity was prioritized throughout the study, particularly in discussions related to students with special needs. While the students themselves were not direct participants, researchers reminded all teacher participants to maintain confidentiality, use pseudonyms, and reflect respectfully when sharing sensitive classroom experiences. This approach upheld dignity and protected the identities of all learners indirectly referenced in the study.

Conclusion

This study reveals that rural multigrade elementary teachers in Odiongan North District cultivate increasingly positive and proactive attitudes toward inclusion when moral convictions, contextual enablers, and informal learning opportunities intersect.

The findings respond directly to the four research objectives:

- **Objective 1** (Attitudes): Teachers demonstrated a moral and pedagogical commitment to inclusion, shaped by personal values and classroom experiences.
- **Objective 2** (Contextual Factors): Resource constraints, multigrade demands, and leadership support emerged as key influences on inclusive attitudes.
- **Objective 3** (Professional Development): The lack of context-specific training highlighted a need for localized capacity-building efforts.
- **Objective 4** (Lived Experiences): Teachers experienced emotional and professional growth through hands-on engagement with students with special needs.

To translate these findings into sustainable practice, we advocate the following **six strategic actions**, grouped under clear implementation themes:

Institutional Recommendations

1. **Institutionalize the ITES Framework**
Embed the seven-module *Inclusive Teaching Empowerment Series* (ITES) into DepEd's Learning Action Cells (LACs) and annual professional development schedules. The modules should cover legal frameworks, differentiated instruction, co-teaching strategies, reflective practices, leadership roles, and digital microlearning.
2. **Enhance Leadership and Collaboration**
Equip school heads with the capacity to foster inclusive school cultures. Leadership training should include peer-facilitated workshops, regular classroom observations, and mechanisms for feedback and mentoring to support sustained implementation.

Resource Mobilization

1. **Optimize Resource Allocation**
Secure and allocate funding for low-cost assistive materials (e.g., tactile aids, manipulatives) and improve classroom infrastructure. These investments are vital in supporting inclusive practices in multigrade, under-resourced schools.

2. Leverage Digital Platforms

Partner with teacher networks and edtech providers to develop microlearning modules tailored to rural contexts. Social media platforms and short-form video content can support timely, accessible, and practical professional learning.

Sustainability Measures

1. **Establish Ongoing Evaluation**
Implement a mixed-methods monitoring and evaluation system to track teacher engagement, classroom practices, and student outcomes. Biannual reflection sessions should inform continuous improvement and ensure relevance of the ITES framework.
2. **Scale and Sustain the Model**
Pilot the refined ITES model in additional rural and urban settings. Conduct longitudinal studies to assess long-term changes in teacher attitudes, instructional practices, and inclusive learning outcomes.

By aligning these strategic actions with the study's core findings and objectives, DepEd and other education stakeholders can promote a teacher-driven, context-responsive pathway toward equitable and inclusive education in rural multigrade classrooms across the Philippines.

Acknowledgement

The researchers extend their sincere gratitude to the elementary teachers in Odiongan North District, Romblon, for their invaluable participation in this explanatory case study. Their insights were crucial in shaping the study's findings and informing the Inclusive Teaching Empowerment Series (ITES). The researchers also acknowledge the Schools Division Office – Romblon for providing the necessary approval to conduct this study.

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