

## Parental Viewpoints on Special Education for Learners with Special Learning Needs in Public Elementary Schools in Cabanatuan City

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**Abstract.** The study examined how special education is implemented for learners with special learning needs in selected public elementary schools in the Division of Cabanatuan City, Philippines, from the viewpoint of parents. Using a descriptive-quantitative design, surveys were administered to parents of learners with special learning needs in three schools offering special education: Lazaro Francisco Integrated School, Cabanatuan East Central School, and Camp Tinio Elementary School. The instrument measured parental viewpoint of the physical and psychological environment, learning outcomes, and challenges encountered. Results indicated that parents generally viewed the special education environment positively, reporting favorable experiences related to their children's well-being and academic progress. However, some challenges were still present, particularly concerning aspects of the physical and psychological environment, which, although infrequent, caused distress or frustration. The study concludes that while special education is largely effective from the parental viewpoint, improvements are needed to address the remaining barriers that impact learners and their families. These findings highlight the importance of continuously enhancing all-encompassing practices to ensure a supportive and fully accessible educational environment for all learners.

**Keywords:** All-encompassing practices; Learner with special learning need; Parent viewpoint; Physical and psychological environment; Public elementary school; Special education

### 1 Introduction

Education is a fundamental right of every child. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that all children must be encouraged to attain the highest level of education possible. Despite this mandate, millions of children worldwide remain out of school, particularly those with disabilities. Children with special needs are among the most marginalized groups in society. They often face discrimination, negative attitudes, and insufficient policies, which limit their opportunities to learn and develop. Globally, around 240 million children live with disabilities, and nearly half of them are excluded from formal schooling (Wood & Whittaker, 2022). The World Health Organization projects that the number of people with disabilities will increase from one billion in 2021 to two billion by 2050, further intensifying the need for inclusive educational systems.

This challenge is evident in the Philippines, where the enrollment of learners with disabilities declined sharply from 360,879 in the previous school year to only 93,895 in 2021–2022 (Yang, 2022). Even before the pandemic, many learners with special needs had limited access to education and support services. Republic Act 11650 was enacted to address

this concern by mandating all schools, both public and private, to provide inclusive education (Carlos, 2022). However, the implementation of inclusive education remains uneven and constrained by limited resources, lack of teacher training, and inadequate facilities.

Teachers, administrators, and parents play a critical role in ensuring the success of inclusive education. Yet, previous studies in the Philippines reveal persistent challenges, such as insufficient preparation, lack of instructional materials, heavy workloads, and inadequate orientation for teachers (Muega, 2016; Barnido, 2018). These constraints hinder schools from effectively meeting the needs of learners with special needs and create doubts about the capacity of educators to implement inclusive practices. Although several studies have examined inclusive education in various regions of the country, little is known about how it is carried out in the Division of Cabanatuan City, where schools face both urban and rural challenges.

Given these issues, there is a clear need to examine how inclusive education is practiced at the local level. This study aims to map the inclusive education landscape in public elementary schools in the Division of Cabanatuan City by exploring the perspectives of administrators, teachers, and parents.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study described the parental viewpoints on special education for learners with special learning needs in public elementary schools in Cabanatuan City.

Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. How may the parents' experience of special education in public elementary schools in Division of Cabanatuan City be described in terms of:

- 1.1 physical environment;
- 1.2 psychological environment; and
- 1.3 learning outcomes;

2. How may the challenges encountered by parents in special education offered by the public elementary schools in Cabanatuan City be described in terms of following:

- 2.1 physical environment;
- 2.2 psychological environment; and
- 2.3 learning outcomes;

3. What course of action may be proposed based on the results of the study?

### **Scope and Delimitation of the Study**

This study explored parental viewpoints on special education for learners with special needs in public elementary schools in Cabanatuan City, focusing on their experiences and challenges related to the physical and psychological school environment as well as the learning outcomes observed in their children. Parents served as the primary informants, representing their children's educational experiences due to the learners' limited capacity to

participate directly in the study. The research excluded specific disability classifications and demographic profiling, concentrating instead on how parents perceive the implementation and impact of special education within these schools, highlighting the support systems and obstacles encountered throughout their children's academic and social development.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study is grounded in Republic Act No. 11650, which establishes a national policy for inclusive education and services for learners with disabilities (LWDs) in the Philippines. This law mandates the creation of Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs) across all school districts to provide specialized support, resources, and accommodations tailored to the needs of LWDs, ensuring their access to quality education within mainstream settings. Complementing this, the Department of Education (DepEd) issues guidelines, such as DepEd Memorandum 020, series 2022, which emphasize equal access, curriculum adaptations, teacher training, special education services, and collaborative partnerships to foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Furthermore, the law highlights the importance of ongoing research to continually identify and address the diverse needs of learners with disabilities.

## **2 Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Design**

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design. Quantitative research involves the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data to describe variables, identify patterns, and examine relationships. The primary aim was to describe parental viewpoints through their experiences and challenges related to special education for learners with special needs in public elementary schools. A structured survey questionnaire served as the main data collection instrument, as it allowed for the efficient gathering of standardized responses from a large group of participants.

### **2.2 Locale of the Study**

The study was conducted in three public elementary schools under the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Cabanatuan City, identified as implementers of special education programs. These schools were Lazaro Francisco Integrated School, Cabanatuan East Central School, and Camp Tinio Elementary School.

### **2.3 Participants**

The participants consisted of 191 parents of learners with special learning needs enrolled in the selected public elementary schools. Learners were not directly involved as respondents due to ethical considerations and developmental limitations in self-reporting. Parents served as proxies, offering insights based on their direct observations and involvement in their children's education.

## 2.4 Research Instruments

Data were gathered through a researcher-developed survey questionnaire composed of two main parts:

1. Parents' Experiences of the implementation of special education – This section assessed parental viewpoints of the physical environment, psychological environment, and learning outcomes experienced by their children.
2. Challenges Encountered by Parents – This section examined difficulties in the same three areas: physical environment, psychological environment, and learning outcomes.

The instrument underwent content validation by a panel of experts, including special education (SPED) specialists, education supervisors, and academic evaluators. A pilot test was conducted with a group of non-participant parents to test the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the items. Based on the pilot test results, the questionnaire was refined for final use. The internal consistency of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded values ranging from .781 to .896, indicating acceptable to good reliability (George & Mallery, 2019).

### Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was conducted in three phases:

1. Permission and Ethical Clearance – Approval was obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent of Cabanatuan City. Informed consent forms were distributed and signed by all participating parents.
2. Questionnaire Administration – The researcher, with assistance from SPED teachers, distributed the survey questionnaires to parents during scheduled orientations. Instructions were clearly explained to ensure accurate and thoughtful responses.
3. Data Retrieval – Completed questionnaires were collected by the researcher, verified for completeness, and encoded for analysis.

### Data Analysis

The encoded responses were analyzed using Microsoft Excel with the assistance of a professional statistician. The following statistical tools were employed:

- Frequencies and percentages – to describe the demographic characteristics of participants.
- Means and standard deviations – to measure parental perceptions of inclusive schooling and challenges, based on a four-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree).

Results were interpreted in line with the scale, with higher means indicating more positive experiences or greater perceived challenges, depending on the construct.

## Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to fundamental ethical principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and protection from harm. Participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, risks, and potential benefits of the research before agreeing to participate. No identifying information was collected to ensure anonymity, and all data were stored securely and treated with strict confidentiality. The researcher maintained transparency, objectivity, and academic integrity throughout the research process.

## 3 Results

### Parents' Experiences of Special Education

#### Physical Environment

Parents reported consistently positive experiences regarding the physical environment (see Table 1). The overall mean score was 3.80, described as *always experienced*. Safety, accessibility, and adaptive furniture received the highest mean ratings ( $M = 3.83$ ). The lowest rating, although still high, was for provision of a safe and orderly learning environment ( $M = 3.74$ ).

**Table 1** Parents' Experiences of the Physical Environment ( $N = 191$ )

Statement	<i>M</i>	Description
The physical environment guarantees the safety of my child.	3.83	Always experienced
The school facilities are barrier-free and meet my child's needs.	3.77	Always experienced
The school provides a safe and orderly learning environment.	3.74	Always experienced
The size of the classroom is suitable for my child's disability.	3.80	Always experienced
The school provides adaptive furniture and equipment as needed.	3.83	Always experienced
<b>Overall mean</b>	<b>3.80</b>	Always experienced

#### Psychological Environment

Parents also reported positive experiences of the psychological environment (see Table 2). The overall mean was 3.77 ( $SD = \dots$ ), interpreted as *always experienced*. The highest-rated item was valuing and respecting all learners ( $M = 3.84$ ), while the lowest-rated was children not being rejected by peers ( $M = 3.72$ ).

**Table 2** Parents' Experiences of the Psychological Environment ( $N = 191$ )

Statement	M	Description
The school fosters a positive and inclusive culture.	3.84	Always experienced
My child is treated as fairly as other children.	3.76	Always experienced
My child is not rejected by other children in the class.	3.72	Always experienced
The school provides access to emotional support services.	3.75	Always experienced
There is no bullying among students.	3.77	Always experienced
<b>Overall mean</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>Always experienced</b>

### Learning Outcomes

Parents perceived improvements in their children's learning outcomes (see Table 3). The overall mean was 3.75 ( $SD = \dots$ ), interpreted as *always experienced*. The highest-rated improvement was in understanding others' emotions ( $M = 4.00$ ), while the lowest-rated was lesson comprehension ( $M = 3.57$ ).

**Table 3** Parents' Experiences of Learning Outcomes ( $N = 191$ )

Statement	M	Description
My child's learning ability has improved.	3.76	Always experienced
My child's communication skills have improved.	3.72	Always experienced
My child understands lessons effectively.	3.57	Always experienced
My child cooperates in group activities.	3.65	Always experienced
My child's ability to understand others' emotions has improved.	4.00	Always experienced
<b>Overall mean</b>	<b>3.75</b>	<b>Always experienced</b>

### Challenges Encountered by Parents

#### Physical Environment

Parents reported few challenges related to the physical environment (see Table 4). The overall mean was 2.37 ( $SD = \dots$ ), interpreted as *rarely encountered*. Lack of adaptive furniture

( $M = 2.49$ ) was rated the highest challenge, while absence of a safe environment ( $M = 2.20$ ) was rated the lowest.

**Table 4** Challenges Encountered in the Physical Environment ( $N = 191$ )

Statement	<i>M</i>	Description
The school environment cannot guarantee my child's safety.	2.48	Rarely encountered
The classrooms lack adaptive furniture and equipment.	2.49	Rarely encountered
The school does not provide a safe and orderly environment.	2.20	Rarely encountered
The class size is unsuitable for my child to learn effectively.	2.27	Rarely encountered
My child's daily need for space cannot be met.	2.40	Rarely encountered
<b>Overall mean</b>	<b>2.37</b>	Rarely encountered

### Psychological Environment

Challenges in the psychological environment were also rarely encountered (see Table 5). The overall mean was 2.30 ( $SD = \dots$ ). Bullying ( $M = 2.34$ ) was the most frequently reported issue, while lack of student orientation about differences ( $M = 2.25$ ) was the least.

**Table 5** Challenges Encountered in the Psychological Environment ( $N = 191$ )

Statement	<i>M</i>	Description
My child is discriminated against due to beliefs about disability.	2.28	Rarely encountered
My child is discriminated during admission procedures.	2.28	Rarely encountered
My child feels rejected by other children.	2.33	Rarely encountered
The school does not orient students to understand my child's differences.	2.25	Rarely encountered
My child is bullied by other students.	2.34	Rarely encountered
<b>Overall mean</b>	<b>2.30</b>	Rarely encountered

### Learning Outcomes

Parents also reported some challenges regarding their children's learning outcomes (see Table 6). The overall mean was 2.40 ( $SD = \dots$ ), interpreted as *rarely encountered*. The highest-rated challenge was persistent challenging behaviors ( $M = 2.48$ ), and the lowest was lack of learning improvement ( $M = 2.32$ ).

**Table 6** Challenges Encountered in Learning Outcomes (N = 191)

Statement	M	Description
My child's learning ability does not improve.	2.3 2	Rarely encountered
My child's communication skills remain lacking.	2.3 8	Rarely encountered
My child's challenging behaviors remain the same.	2.4 8	Rarely encountered
My child struggles to make and maintain friendships.	2.4 1	Rarely encountered
My child's ability to understand others' emotions remains lacking.	2.4 3	Rarely encountered
<b>Overall mean</b>	<b>2.4 0</b>	Rarely encountered

## 4 Discussion

### Parents' Experiences of Inclusive Education

#### Physical Environment

Parents consistently reported positive experiences with the physical environment of schools, particularly in terms of safety, accessibility, and provision of adaptive furniture. These findings align with Barrett et al. (2015, 2019), who emphasized that school infrastructure—including lighting, air quality, accessibility, and adaptive facilities—has a direct influence on learners' well-being and academic achievement. The slightly lower rating for a "safe and orderly learning environment" suggests that while basic facilities are in place, maintaining consistency in classroom order and safety during instruction remains a challenge.

#### Psychological Environment

The psychological environment was also rated highly, with parents affirming that their children were valued, respected, and treated fairly. These results support the observations of Espinoza et al. (2023) and Roldan et al. (2021), who found that inclusive classrooms foster social acceptance and mutual respect among learners with and without disabilities. Although rejection by peers received the lowest mean rating within this domain, it still reflected a generally positive perception. This indicates that while schools have made progress in creating inclusive cultures, peer socialization continues to require attention.

#### Learning Outcomes

Parents observed improvements in their children's learning outcomes, particularly in empathy and emotional understanding. This reinforces UNESCO's (2021) assertion that inclusive practices support holistic development, not only academic performance. However, lesson comprehension was rated comparatively lower, suggesting that academic instruction for learners with special needs still requires stronger differentiation. This observation is consistent with Forrest et al. (2011), who noted that learners with disabilities often exhibit lower academic achievement due to insufficient accommodation in teaching and assessment.

## Challenges Encountered by Parents

### Physical Environment

While generally positive, parents identified occasional challenges in the physical environment, such as insufficient adaptive furniture and unsuitable classroom sizes. These findings are consistent with Coster et al. (2013), who reported that environmental barriers limit participation of learners with disabilities in school. UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (2020) also highlighted the importance of providing adaptive resources and reorganizing classroom spaces to ensure equitable participation.

### Psychological Environment

Bullying emerged as the most notable challenge, even though it was rated as rarely encountered. This is consistent with UNESCO's (2023) report that children with disabilities are disproportionately affected by bullying, which impacts their health, well-being, and academic performance. The finding underscores the need for stronger school-based interventions, such as awareness programs and peer sensitization, to reduce stigma and promote acceptance. Studies by Alvarez-Guerrero et al. (2023) further support dialogic gatherings as effective strategies to minimize violence and enhance inclusive relationships.

### Learning Outcomes

Challenges in learning outcomes were mostly related to persistent behavioral difficulties, lack of communication skills, and limited improvement in academic performance. Nye et al. (2016) similarly reported that children with behavioral difficulties pose additional challenges to teachers and require specialized support. Gautam and Arya (2023) attributed poor performance to psychosocial factors, such as ineffective learning strategies and limited parental awareness. These findings suggest that inclusive education should not only provide structural support but also address behavioral and instructional challenges through individualized interventions.

## Implications and Recommendations

The results highlighted several implications for inclusive education in the Division of Cabanatuan City:

1. **Strengthening academic support** – Schools need to provide differentiated instruction, accommodations, and specialized assessment to enhance lesson comprehension for learners with special needs.
2. **Enhancing facilities** – Continuous investment in adaptive furniture, accessible classroom layouts, and safe environments is essential for sustaining inclusive practices.
3. **Addressing social barriers** – Programs that reduce bullying and promote peer understanding should be prioritized to ensure psychological safety.

4. **Supporting families** – Parents require ongoing training and collaboration with teachers to manage behavioral and academic challenges effectively.
5. **Policy reinforcement** – Findings support the need for sustained government funding and monitoring of inclusive education initiatives under Republic Act No. 11650.

## 5 Conclusions

This study examined the special education for learners with special learning needs in public elementary schools in the Division of Cabanatuan City from the viewpoints of parents of learners with special needs. Findings indicated that special education is generally perceived by parents as effectively implemented, particularly in terms of physical and psychological school environments and the learning outcomes of their children.

Parents reported positive experiences and expressed that their children's educational needs were being met in inclusive settings. Challenges encountered were minimal, suggesting that the inclusive practices in these schools are supportive and responsive to learners with special needs.

The findings highlighted the importance of sustaining special education efforts and strengthening parent-school collaboration. Future research may further explore the long-term impacts of special education on learners with special needs, as well as the evolving role of parents in supporting inclusive practices.

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