



Sociocultural barriers and support mechanisms in inclusive education: Parents' lived experiences of learners with special needs

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ABSTRACT

Learners with special needs continue to encounter multifaceted sociocultural barriers that constrain their educational participation and social inclusion. Despite legislative and policy frameworks supporting inclusive education, persistent societal misconceptions, cultural norms, and institutional limitations impede meaningful implementation. This phenomenological study examined parents' perceptions of the barriers their children face and the support mechanisms that mitigate these challenges. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five purposively selected parents from Agripino P. Santos Elementary School, Laoag City, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. Findings revealed three interrelated domains of barriers: societal attitudes and misconceptions, including stigma, discrimination, and limited community acceptance; cultural and family norms, such as beliefs linking disability to shame or misfortune and communication constraints; and institutional and structural challenges, including under-resourced inclusive education and fragmented government support. Supportive interventions encompassed public awareness campaigns, inclusive educational programs, family empowerment initiatives, and policy reinforcement. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the study underscores that disability inclusion constitutes a sociocultural process requiring coordinated, multi-level strategies across families, communities, schools, and institutions to translate rights-based policies into lived inclusion.

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Introduction

Inclusive education has gained increasing attention in global and national policy discourse as a rights-based approach to addressing the educational needs of learners with disabilities. In the Philippines,

legislative measures such as the Enhanced Basic Education Act (RA 10533) and the Inclusive Education Act (RA 11650) underscore the state's commitment to ensuring equitable access to quality education for all learners. Despite these advances, children with special needs continue to experience exclusion and marginalization within educational and social contexts, suggesting a persistent gap between policy intent and lived experience.

Existing literature emphasizes that barriers to inclusion extend beyond individual impairments and are deeply embedded within sociocultural, familial, and institutional structures. Societal misconceptions, stigma, and discriminatory attitudes often shape how disability is perceived and responded to, influencing children's access to education, peer relationships, and community participation. Cultural beliefs that associate disability with shame, misfortune, or moral failing further exacerbate exclusion, particularly in collectivist contexts where family reputation and social conformity are highly valued.

While international scholarship increasingly adopts ecological and sociocultural perspectives on disability, there remains a need for context-specific qualitative studies that capture how these barriers are experienced locally. In the Philippine context, parental voices remain underrepresented in empirical research, despite families playing a central role in advocacy, caregiving, and educational decision-making. Understanding parents' perceptions of sociocultural barriers is therefore critical for designing culturally responsive and sustainable inclusion strategies.

Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study examines the sociocultural barriers affecting learners with special needs as perceived by their parents. By situating disability within interconnected family, community, school, and institutional systems, the study seeks to illuminate the less visible but highly consequential forms of exclusion that continue to shape educational participation and social inclusion.

Literature review

Defining special needs and special education

Special needs refer to the requirements of individuals who experience physical, intellectual, developmental, or emotional conditions that necessitate additional support for optimal learning, development, and social participation (Smith et al., 2020). These needs encompass cognitive delays, sensory impairments, autism spectrum disorders, learning disabilities, and other developmental challenges that may limit functioning in conventional educational settings. The concept is inherently multidimensional, encompassing both medical and social perspectives, and recognizes that barriers to participation are not solely rooted in the individual but also in the environment, social attitudes, and institutional structures.

Special education, on the other hand, is a structured system of educational practices designed to address these unique needs, providing tailored curricula, teaching strategies, and support services to promote learning and inclusion (Ainscow, 2020). In the Philippine context, special education programs are delivered through Special Education (SPED) centers, inclusive classrooms, and community-based interventions, governed by legislation such as the Enhanced Basic Education Act (RA 10533) and the

Inclusive Education Act (RA 11650). The goal is not only academic development but also social integration, skill acquisition, and empowerment, with an emphasis on equity, accessibility, and the child's holistic well-being (Galang & Bacani, 2023; Manalo, 2022).

Sociocultural barriers and disability perceptions

Learners with special needs in the Philippines face persistent sociocultural barriers, shaped by societal attitudes, family beliefs, and cultural norms. Cultural interpretations often link disability to misfortune, divine punishment, or shame, which can reinforce exclusion and impede help-seeking (Reyes & Canda, 2016; & Soriano, 2023). Studies indicate that negative community attitudes and misconceptions frequently have a greater impact on participation than the impairment itself, influencing whether children are accepted, supported, or segregated in educational and social environments (Miles, 2002).

Teacher preparedness and inclusive education practices

Teachers play a critical role in implementing special education and promoting inclusive practices. Research in Philippine primary and secondary schools demonstrates that teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and preparedness directly affect inclusion outcomes (Vergara et al., 2025). While teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward learners with special needs, structural limitations—such as large class sizes, insufficient training, and lack of adaptive resources—restrict effective practice (Macapaz et al., 2024). Teacher well-being also correlates with inclusion, as stress and burnout reduce capacity to provide individualized attention (Factor & Saenz, 2025).

Inclusive education programs, which integrate learners with special needs into mainstream classrooms while providing supplementary support, are recognized as essential for preventing marginalization and fostering peer acceptance. Special needs education centers complement these efforts by offering individualized support, therapies, and life skills development (Galang & Bacani, 2023).

Family, community, and policy dynamics

Families, particularly mothers as primary caregivers, face heightened stress, anxiety, and social isolation due to caregiving responsibilities and societal stigma (Manalo, 2022; Cinar & Eti-Aslan, 2017). Spirituality, community support, and culturally grounded coping strategies play significant roles in resilience-building among Filipino families (Paderes & Abulon, 2021).

At the policy level, the Philippine government has developed comprehensive legislative frameworks for special education, yet implementation gaps remain. Barriers include insufficient funding, limited resources, uneven distribution of SPED teachers, and weak enforcement at the local level (Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2025; Alcala & Panopio, 2024). These gaps illustrate the policy–practice divide, showing that legislation alone cannot overcome entrenched cultural and social barriers.

Research questions

This study aimed to understand the barriers encountered by learners with special needs in their academic pursuits, as perceived by their parents, and to identify support mechanisms and programs to mitigate these barriers. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the socio-cultural barriers encountered by the learners with special needs in their academic undertaking as perceived by their parents?
2. What support is provided to these learners to reduce the effects of these barriers to their academic undertaking?

Methodology

This chapter presents the research design, data sources, including the study locale, population, and sampling; the data-gathering instrument; and data analysis, including its ethical standards.

Research design

The study adopted a phenomenological research design to examine how parents perceived the sociocultural barriers faced by children with special needs. This design was selected because phenomenology prioritizes the exploration of lived experiences and seeks to uncover the *essence* of how individuals interpret and make meaning of situations within their sociocultural context. Through this approach, the study aims not only to identify the barriers encountered by children with special needs but also to deeply understand how parents emotionally, cognitively, and socially experience these barriers daily.

Locale of the study

The study was conducted in one of the schools in the Schools Division of Laoag City that caters to learners with special needs through inclusive education and SPED programs. It is located at A.G.Tupaz St., Laoag City, Ilocos Norte.

Population and sampling

Parents from Agripino P. Santos Elementary School were purposively selected to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit individuals with direct, relevant, and lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation—namely, the sociocultural barriers encountered by children with special needs. This strategy ensured that the participants were information-rich cases capable of providing meaningful insight into the research questions.

Data gathering instrument

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich, personal accounts of how parents perceive the sociocultural barriers experienced by the learners. Semi-structured interviewing was chosen because it allows researchers to collect open-ended data and explore participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in depth through flexible dialogue guided by a thematic protocol (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). It provides a balance between guided inquiry and narrative openness, allowing participants to describe not only *what* barriers they encounter but also *how* these barriers shape their emotions, behaviors, and sense of social belonging. Each interview was conducted in a private and comfortable setting to ensure confidentiality and psychological safety, thereby encouraging authentic and reflective responses.

Data gathering procedure

Data were collected over two weeks from parents of learners enrolled in the special education program at Agripino P. Santos Elementary School, Laoag City. Ethical approval was obtained, and participants provided written informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually in a private setting to promote openness and reflective responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Interviews lasted 20–30 minutes and focused on sociocultural barriers encountered by the learner in their academic undertaking and the support mechanisms available. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent and supplemented with field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. Transcripts were prepared verbatim and returned to participants for member checking to ensure credibility and accuracy. Pseudonyms were used, and data were securely stored to maintain confidentiality, adhering to established ethical standards in qualitative research.

Data analysis tool

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Coding and theme development were conducted manually to ensure that findings remained grounded in participants’ authentic experiences.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to ethical standards to protect participants’ privacy and confidentiality, following approval obtained from the Divine Word College of Laoag–Graduate School of Education. Participants provided written informed consent before data collection, ensuring voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms and omitting identifying information. The study adhered to the ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and integrity in educational research (BERA, 2018).

Presentation of data and analysis

This section presents and analyzes the findings from semi-structured interviews with five (5) parents of learners with special needs at Agripino P. Santos Elementary School, Laoag City.

Problem 1. What are the barriers encountered by the learners with special needs in their academic undertaking as perceived by their parents?

Table 1 summarizes the barriers encountered by learners with special needs, as perceived by their parents. These barriers span three interrelated domains: **1. societal attitudes and misconceptions, 2. cultural and family norms, and 3. institutional and structural challenges**. Parents consistently reported that misconceptions, stigma, and limited community acceptance restrict both social interaction and academic participation. These societal barriers are further compounded by cultural beliefs, family pressures, and communication challenges that influence how disability is perceived and managed within households and communities. Moreover, inadequate government support and limited access to inclusive education services exacerbate these difficulties, underscoring the systemic and interconnected nature of exclusion experienced by learners with special needs.

The table presents the identified themes, corresponding categories, and representative participant statements that illustrate these barriers.

Table 1. Parents’ Insights about barriers encountered by their learner with special needs in their academic undertaking

| Themes | Category | Extracted Statements |
|--|--|--|
| Societal attitudes and misconceptions | Public misconceptions and misinformation | “A lack of awareness and the persistence of misinformation mean that many individuals still hold misconceptions about disabilities.” Parent 1 |
| | Stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion | “Stigma and discrimination persist, with social exclusion often leading to discriminatory attitudes and practices toward individuals with disabilities.” Parent 5 |
| | Lack of acceptance in the community | “There is a lack of awareness and acceptance within society and the community toward individuals with disabilities.” Parent 2 |
| Cultural and family norms | Cultural beliefs | “Cultural interpretations of disability—such as viewing it as a punishment, a source of shame, or a taboo—serve to reinforce the exclusion of individuals with disabilities.” Parent 4 |
| | Family attitudes and pressure | “Cultural and family pressures, along with certain family attitudes, significantly influence how individuals with disabilities are perceived and treated.” Parent 3 |
| | Communication barriers | “Communication barriers hinder effective interaction and limit the participation of individuals with disabilities in various social and educational settings.” Parent 5 |
| Institutional and structural challenges | Lack of government support and social programs | “There is a lack of government support and programs to adequately address the needs of individuals with disabilities.” Parent 1 |

| | | |
|--|---------------------------------|--|
| | Barriers in inclusive education | “The lack of inclusive education and limited access to learning opportunities restricts the educational development of individuals with disabilities.” Parent 3 |
|--|---------------------------------|--|

Source: Zuniga(2026)

Table 1 demonstrates that learners with special needs encounter interrelated sociocultural, familial, and institutional barriers that constrain academic participation. At the societal level, persistent misconceptions and stigma normalize exclusionary attitudes, shaping peer interactions and community responses in educational settings (Miles, 2002; Thomas, 2007). Such attitudes often operate as structural constraints that limit educational access beyond the effects of impairment alone (Ainscow, 2020). Cultural and family norms further mediate these barriers, as beliefs associating disability with shame or misfortune influence caregiving practices, frequently resulting in overprotection, diminished parental advocacy, and limited school engagement (Reyes & Canda, 2016; Manalo, 2022). Communication barriers exacerbate these challenges by weakening collaboration between families and educational institutions, thereby undermining coordinated support (Paderes & Abulon, 2021). At the institutional level, inadequate government support, limited resources, and weak implementation of inclusive education policies reinforce systemic inequities and restrict meaningful inclusion (Ainscow, 2020; Vergara et al., 2025; Alcalá & Panopio, 2024). Collectively, these findings highlight exclusion as an ecological and systemic phenomenon, underscoring the need for coordinated, multi-level strategies that address societal attitudes, family engagement, and institutional capacity

Problem 2. What support is provided to these learners to mitigate the effects of these barriers on their academic performance?

Table 2 Analysis of parent narratives indicates that support for learners with special needs operates across **community, educational, familial, and institutional domains**, reflecting a coordinated, multi-level approach to inclusion. At the community level, public awareness campaigns and structured interaction activities foster understanding, reduce stigma, and promote social acceptance. Within educational settings, inclusive classrooms and specialized SPED centers provide equitable learning opportunities tailored to diverse needs. Family and caregiver support, including empowerment programs and centralized access to resources, enhances parents’ capacity to advocate for their children. Institutional reinforcement through government programs and strict implementation of inclusive education policies ensures sustainability and alignment with national mandates, reinforcing systemic support for learners’ participation and academic success.

Table 2: Multi-level support mechanisms for learners with special needs

| Themes | Category | Extracted Staments |
|--------|-------------------------------|--|
| | Community awareness campaigns | “Awareness and acceptance campaigns in the community aim |

| | | |
|---|----------------------------------|--|
| Public awareness and social acceptance | | to educate the public and promote positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.” Parent 4 |
| | Interaction activities | “Activities that encourage interaction between children with and without special needs help promote acceptance, understanding, and inclusive social relationships.” Parent 2 |
| Inclusive educational initiatives | Expansion of inclusive education | “Inclusive education programs provide equitable learning opportunities by integrating students with and without disabilities in the same educational setting.” Parent 1 |
| | Special needs education centers | “A special needs education center is a facility dedicated to providing tailored educational programs and support services for individuals with disabilities.” Parent 5 |
| Family and caregiver support systems | Family empowerment and training | “Family support and empowerment programs provide resources, guidance, and training to help families effectively support and advocate for the needs of their children with disabilities.” Parent 3 |
| | Access to support resources | “A centralized, easily accessible resource that provides families with information on therapies, educational programs, and government assistance helps streamline support for children with disabilities and their caregivers.” Parent 2 |
| Policy and institutional strengthening | Government support and programs | “Government support and programs for children with special needs provide essential services, resources, and policies to promote their education, development, and overall well-being.” Parent 5 |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | Implementation of inclusive education policies | “The school strictly follows policies to ensure all learners are given equal opportunities.”Parent 4 |
|--|--|--|

Source: Zuniga(2026)

The table demonstrates that interventions addressing sociocultural barriers among learners with special needs function across four interconnected domains: public awareness, inclusive education, family support, and institutional reinforcement. Public awareness initiatives, including community-based campaigns and intergroup interaction activities, help correct misconceptions, reduce stigma, and foster social acceptance (Miles, 2002; Delos Reyes & Soriano, 2023). Inclusive educational initiatives position schools as central sites of social integration by combining mainstream inclusive programs with specialized education centers to deliver individualized support while minimizing segregation (Ainscow, 2020; Galang & Bacani, 2023). Family and caregiver support systems enhance parental advocacy and resilience through training, guidance, and centralized access to resources, thereby reducing social isolation and promoting informed caregiving practices (Manalo, 2022; Cinar & Eti-Aslan, 2017). Institutional and policy reinforcement underpins the sustainability of these interventions by legitimizing inclusive practices through government programs, equitable resource allocation, and systemic support mechanisms (Alcala & Panopio, 2024; Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2025). Collectively, these domains reflect an ecological approach to inclusion, wherein attitudinal change, educational access, family capacity, and institutional policy interact synergistically to transform inclusion from fragmented initiatives into sustained societal change (Bronfenbrenner, Thomas, 2007).

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that learners with special needs continue to face complex sociocultural barriers that span societal, cultural, familial, and institutional systems, highlighting the need for multi-level, coordinated interventions. Theoretically, the study reinforces and extends ecological and sociocultural models of disability, particularly Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, by illustrating how educational exclusion emerges from interactions among families, communities, schools, and policy frameworks rather than from individual impairments alone (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Thomas, 2007). By centering parental perspectives, the study provides context-specific evidence of how stigma, culturally embedded beliefs linking disability to shame or misfortune, family practices, and institutional constraints intersect to shape academic participation and social inclusion (Ainscow, 2020; Galang & Bacani, 2023). These findings align with previous research suggesting that societal attitudes can exert greater influence on educational outcomes than the disability itself, particularly in collectivist cultural contexts where family reputation and social conformity are highly valued (Miles, 2002; Delos Reyes & Soriano, 2023).

Practically, the results indicate that interventions must be systemic and multi-sectoral. At the societal level, public awareness campaigns and structured intergroup activities are critical for challenging misconceptions, reducing stigma, and promoting social acceptance (Miles, 2002; Delos Reyes & Soriano, 2023). In schools, inclusive education must be strengthened through teacher preparation,

adaptive resources, and the integration of mainstream classrooms with specialized SPED centers to provide equitable learning opportunities and individualized support (Ainscow, 2020; Vergara et al., 2025). Families serve as pivotal agents of inclusion, and empowerment programs offering training, guidance, and centralized access to resources can enhance parental advocacy, reduce isolation, and support effective home–school collaboration (Manalo, 2022; Cinar & Eti-Aslan, 2017; Paderes & Abulon, 2021). At the institutional level, consistent policy enforcement, funding, and inter-agency coordination are necessary to bridge the gap between legislative intent and lived inclusion, ensuring sustainability and systemic integration of inclusive practices (Alcala & Panopio, 2024; Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2025). Collectively, these findings underscore that inclusion is a transformative sociocultural process that requires alignment across families, communities, schools, and institutions rather than isolated or temporary interventions.

Despite these contributions, the study has limitations. The small, purposively selected sample of parents limits the transferability of findings and may not reflect the full diversity of experiences across regions, school types, or cultural contexts. The reliance on parental perspectives also constrains the analysis, as the voices of learners, teachers, and policymakers were not captured (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the phenomenological approach, while effective for exploring lived experiences, cannot establish causal relationships or quantify the magnitude of barriers and support mechanisms.

Future research should address these limitations by engaging larger and more diverse samples across multiple regions and incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives. Longitudinal or mixed-methods studies are recommended to examine how sociocultural barriers, family dynamics, institutional support, and educational outcomes evolve (Ainscow, 2020). Investigating the effectiveness of specific interventions—such as awareness campaigns, caregiver empowerment programs, or inclusive education policies—would provide evidence-based strategies for replication and scaling. Comparative studies across regions or countries with similar cultural contexts could further illuminate how sociocultural norms shape inclusion globally. Importantly, including learners’ perspectives would provide a more complete understanding of how children experience and navigate social, cultural, and institutional barriers.

Overall, this study affirms that achieving meaningful inclusion for learners with special needs requires a holistic, ecological, and systemic approach. Inclusion is not merely a policy mandate or service provision; it is a sustained, transformative process that integrates societal attitudes, family engagement, educational access, and policy enforcement. Only through coordinated action across all ecological levels can the rights of learners with special needs be translated into tangible, equitable, and lived educational and social participation (Bronfenbrenner,; Ainscow, 2020; Galang & Bacani, 2023).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that children with special needs in the Philippines encounter systemic sociocultural barriers arising from societal misconceptions, cultural and family norms, and institutional deficiencies. Stigma, lack of awareness, and limited acceptance intersect with overprotective or misinformed family practices, while insufficient government programs and under-resourced inclusive

education exacerbate exclusion. Effective interventions require a multi-level approach that combines public awareness campaigns, inter-group interaction, inclusive education, family empowerment, and policy reinforcement. These strategies operate synergistically to reduce stigma, enhance social participation, and promote equitable access to learning and community engagement. The findings are theoretically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, highlighting how individual outcomes are shaped by interactions across family, community, and institutional environments. Practically, the study emphasizes that disability inclusion is a sociocultural transformation rather than a policy formality. It is recommended to implement nationwide awareness campaigns, expand inclusive education programs and SPED centers, strengthen family empowerment initiatives with caregiver training and centralized resource access, and reinforce policy and institutional support to ensure sustainability and equitable resource allocation.

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