

Implementation of Inclusive Education Policy: A Qualitative Descriptive Study Through the Perceptions of School Heads Guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior as Lens

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Abstract

Inclusive education policy and practice are missed aligned. I explored the implementation of inclusive education policy. Using descriptive qualitative design, I interviewed 8 school heads, whom I selected via purposive sampling. Through thematic analysis. I found out that school heads viewed inclusive education as value-driven, shaped by moral and cultural values, while navigating stakeholder expectations and resource limits, fostering resilient, adaptive, and reflective leadership. Education officials may enhance school heads' attitudes, reduce social pressures, and support reflective, flexible, community-centered practices in implementing inclusive education. Future studies may apply regression, and factor analyses to examine and develop measures of attitudes, norms, control, and inclusive education implementation.

Keywords: inclusive education policy; qualitative descriptive; school heads; theory of planned behavior

INTRODUCTION

As I reflected on the landscape of inclusive education, I observed a persistent and troubling gap between policy intentions and their actual implementation in schools. While inclusive education was envisioned as a transformative approach that promoted equitable access and meaningful participation for learners with disabilities, I saw that this vision remained insufficiently realized across many educational systems (Ainscow, 2020). Yet, from my perspective as a researcher and practitioner in special education, the translation of these policies into everyday school practices often appeared fragmented and inconsistent. I was particularly drawn to the role of school heads, who stood at the forefront of policy implementation. I perceived that they frequently encountered significant barriers such as ambiguous policy guidelines, limited financial and material resources, inadequate professional training, and resistance from teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. To me, these layered challenges collectively constrained their capacity to operationalize inclusive education principles in a sustained, coherent, and meaningful manner (Dizon, E. I. 2022).

In the Philippine context, I found Republic Act No. 11650, or the Inclusive Education Act of 2022, to be a landmark policy that mandated the inclusion of learners with disabilities in the regular education system. However, as I examined its implementation more closely, I recognized that the realities within schools often diverged from their aspirational goals. I observed that school heads frequently grappled with limited resources, insufficient training opportunities, and a lack of institutional support structures necessary for effective implementation (Moberg et al., 2020). Even when I looked beyond the Philippines to countries with more established education systems, I noticed that the transition from policy to practice remained complex and fraught with challenges (Verschuere et al., 2020). In resource-constrained settings within the Philippines, these challenges appeared even more pronounced, as school leaders navigated competing demands, scarce resources, and systemic limitations (McCoy et al., 2020). These observations led me to question how school heads made sense of inclusive education policies in their everyday leadership practices and how they negotiated the tensions between policy expectations and contextual realities.

As I further examined the implications of these implementation gaps, I recognized that poor or weak implementation of inclusive education policy had profound negative consequences for students, schools, and educational equity. When policies were not effectively enacted due to inadequate teacher training, limited resources, weak administrative support, and poor enforcement to students with disabilities and other diverse learners remained at risk of academic underachievement, social exclusion, and unequal access to meaningful learning opportunities, as schools failed to provide appropriate accommodations and supports (Loreman, 2021). In such contexts, I understood that the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities perpetuated systemic inequities, undermined educational quality, and limited the full participation and potential of all learners, particularly those from marginalized groups who were supposed to benefit most from inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2020). It was for this reason that this research was conducted.

Through this study, I sought to examine and describe the implementation of inclusive education policy through the lens of school heads. I believed that their perspectives were essential in illuminating how policies

were interpreted, enacted, and negotiated within the realities of school contexts, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding inclusive education implementation.

Significance of Study

I considered this study significant because it allowed me to closely examine and describe the implementation of inclusive education policy through the lens of school heads in the Philippines, whose leadership roles placed them at the center of translating national mandates into everyday school practices. As I reflected on the enactment of Republic Act No. 11650, or the Inclusive Education Act of 2022, I recognized that while the policy articulated a strong commitment to inclusion, much of its success depended on how school heads interpreted, navigated, and operationalized its provisions within contexts often marked by limited resources, insufficient professional development opportunities, and varying levels of stakeholder readiness. Through this inquiry, I aimed to surface their perspectives, believing that their insights could illuminate the persistent gap I observed between policy intentions and school-level realities. I saw school heads as the primary beneficiaries of this study, as articulating their perspectives could inform more responsive leadership development programs and context-sensitive support systems. I also believed that teachers and SPED professionals could benefit from understanding how leadership practices shaped collaborative cultures and shared responsibility for learners with diverse needs. Furthermore, I anticipated that policymakers and DepEd officials could draw meaningful insights from the findings, particularly in refining implementation strategies and ensuring that top-down directives were better aligned with the nuanced realities of local schools, especially in resource-constrained settings. In my view, strengthening these connections contributed to national commitments to inclusive education and resonated with broader global aspirations for equitable and quality education for all learners.

Statement of the Problem

1. In this study I explored the perception of the school heads on the implementation of inclusive education policy. I sought answers to the following questions.
2. What are the descriptions of school heads regarding their attitudes towards implementing the Inclusive Education Policy?
3. What are the descriptions of school heads on social norms concerning the implementation of Inclusive Education Policy?
4. What are the descriptions of school heads on their sense of control in carrying out the Inclusive Education Policy?

Assumptions of the Study

It is assumed that the participants' descriptions of the implementation of Inclusive Education Policy are primarily shaped by their personal attitudes, their perceptions of societal expectations, and their perceived capacity to manage or influence its implementation. Consequently, their intention to implement the policy is not treated as a central factor in this study.

Theoretical Lens

To examine the complexities surrounding the implementation of inclusive education policies, I employed the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as the guiding theoretical framework of this study. This theory posited that intentions shaped behavior and that these intentions were influenced by three key factors: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991).

Conceptual Paradigm

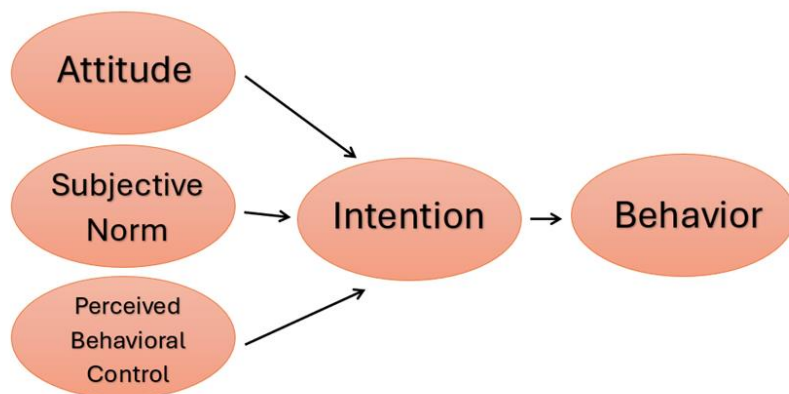


Fig. 1.1 The conceptual paradigm of the study.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative descriptive research design was employed. This design is a flexible qualitative approach that provides a clear and comprehensive account of the implementation of inclusive education policy through the lens of school heads within their natural context, emphasizing direct reporting with minimal interpretation. It is particularly suitable for my study that seeks to describe areas that are not yet well understood, especially in applied fields such as education. According to John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth (2024), this design allows researchers to present straightforward descriptions grounded in participants' own words, while Johnny Saldaña (2021) highlights its usefulness in producing practical, context-based findings. Its advantages include simplicity, flexibility, and applicability to real-world settings.

Locale of the Study

My study was conducted in a selected public school in Davao City that offers special education services under the Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN) program. It is presented to identify where data collection takes place and to provide context for interpreting the findings.

Sample and Sampling Technique

This study consisted of eight (8) school heads from a public school in Davao City who were directly involved in implementing inclusive education policy under the Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN) program. I utilized purposive sampling techniques to intentionally select individuals with direct responsibility and substantial knowledge of the program, enabling the collection of detailed and contextually grounded descriptions from the perspective of school heads, as this approach focuses on selecting information-rich participants relevant to the study (Uwe Flick, 2022).

Data Gathering Technique

In this study, I used in-depth interviews to gather data. In-depth interview is a qualitative data collection method that involves a one-on-one, open-ended conversation between the researcher and a participant to

explore a topic in detail. I employ this technique to obtain rich, detailed, and context-specific data by participants to elaborate on their responses and provide deeper insights into the implementation of inclusive education policy in their respective schools. This method enables researchers to explore topics thoroughly through flexible questioning and probing (Braun & Clarke, 2023). In this study their interview was conducted with (8) eight public elementary school heads to explore their viewpoints in implementing inclusive education in their respective schools. Prior to participation, each potential participant received a comprehensive orientation detailing the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Open-ended questions guided the conversation, enabling participants to freely express and describe their perspectives, challenges, and insights related to inclusive education policy implementation. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent and later transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy.

Data Analysis Technique

This study employed thematic analysis to organize and interpret the data gathered from in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify and analyze patterns or themes within data. It allows researchers to organize and interpret data to generate meaningful insights (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Thematic analysis is used to systematically identify and interpret patterns within qualitative data, resulting in organized and meaningful findings. It is flexible and allows researchers to analyze different types of data while staying grounded in participants' accounts.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In conducting this study, I placed strong emphasis on ethical integrity to ensure the well-being, rights, and confidentiality of the participants. Prior to data collection, I secured an ethical clearance certificate from the Society of Moral Integrity and Legal Ethics (SMILE) and obtained permission to conduct my study from the Department of Education, Division of Davao. I also obtained informed consent from each school head, ensuring that they clearly understood the purpose and procedures of the study, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing personal identifiers and securely storing all data to prevent unauthorized access (Makoelle, 2020). To create a safe and respectful interview environment, I encouraged participants to express their perspectives openly without fear of judgment or professional repercussions.

To ensure the trustworthiness of my study, I focused on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through member checking, allowing participants to review and verify their responses. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through systematic documentation of the research process and reflexive recording.

RESULTS

In this chapter, I presented my conversations with my study participants, my modified paradigm and the summary findings including school head Attitudes, Social Norms, Perceived Behavior Control, and Intentions in implementing the inclusive policy.

School Head Attitudes toward Implementing the Inclusive Education Policy

School heads viewed inclusive education as a responsibility grounded in a firm belief that every child has the potential to learn, as reflected by one school head's insight. One study participant recalled that...

I firmly believe that every child has unique talents and abilities and that education should be a transformative experience that nurtures the potential in all students, not just those who fit into traditional academic molds. Ang matag bata aduna gyud kaugalingong kahanas ug abilidad, ug ang edukasyon dapat mahimong kasinatian nga makausab sa kinabuhi, nga motubo ug mosidlak ang potensyal sa matag estudyante, dili lang katong maoy angay sa tradisyonal nga pamaagi sa pagkat-on. (I firmly believe that every child has unique talents and abilities and that education should be a transformative experience that nurtures the potential in all students, not just those who fit into traditional academic molds. Every child truly has unique skills and abilities, and education should be an experience that can change lives, helping each student grow and shine in their potential, not only those who fit the traditional ways of learning). SH08_aud8_2:57.1

Another one sustained by saying...

I regard inclusivity not merely as a policy obligation but as a moral duty that cultivates belonging and strengthens community. SH06_aud6_3:54.3

Which was also affirmed by another study participants who also explained that...

My values are rooted in the conviction that no child should be excluded based on ability, background, or learning pace. As expressed, ang matag bata aduna gyud kaugalingong kahanas ug abilidad. (My values are rooted in the conviction that no child should be excluded based on ability, background, or learning pace. As expressed, "every child truly has their own unique strengths and abilities.). SH01_aud1_1:15.2

School heads viewed inclusive education as a value-driven and moral responsibility grounded in equity and respect for diversity, guiding them to ensure that no learner is excluded.

Social Norms on the Implementation of the Inclusive Education Policy

I observed that participants balanced diverse stakeholder expectations, and while these pressures sometimes constrained decisions, they also fostered collaboration and strengthened inclusive practices. As one of the school head said:

Parents and community members express their views about inclusive education in different ways, some through meetings, others through personal conversations or social media. Naay mga ginikanan nga aktibong nagsuporta sa inclusive education, kay gusto nila nga tanang bata makakat-on ug magmalampuson. Pero naa pud uban nga naga-express sa ilang kabalaka, labi na kung ilang gibati nga dili kaayo natubag ang partikular nga panginahanglan sa ilang anak. (Parents and community members express their views about inclusive education through different ways, some, through meetings, others through personal conversations or social media. Some parents actively support inclusive education because they want all children to learn and succeed. But others express their concerns, especially when they feel that the particular needs of their child are not adequately addressed.). SH06_aud6_5:36.4

One participant mentioned that...

My supervisors expect the school to maintain high standards while ensuring inclusivity in teaching. Nanghinaot sila nga maabot namo ang academic goals pero sa parehas nga panahon, mahatagan ug husto nga suporta ang mga estudyanteng adunay lain-laing panginahanglan. Mao nga kinahanglan gyud nga mabalanse ang paghatag og kalidad nga edukasyon ug ang pagtagad sa individual nga kalainan sa mga bata. (My supervisors expect the school to maintain high standards while ensuring inclusivity in teaching. They hope that we achieve the academic goals while at the same time providing adequate support to

students with diverse needs. That is why it is really necessary to balance delivering quality education and addressing the individual differences of the children.). SH03_aud3_3:24.2

I noticed how their thoughtful pauses, firm tone, and deliberate hand gestures reflected the ways stakeholder expectations shaped school heads' implementation of inclusive education, bringing both support and pressure. Despite constraints, these demands fostered dialogue, collaboration, and shared responsibility, ultimately strengthening inclusive practices.

Behavioral Control in Implementing the Inclusive Education Policy

My conversations led me to recognize that resource limitations challenged inclusive education, often forcing school heads to prioritize immediate needs over long-term goals, as one participant admitted:

When there are enough resources like trainings, visual aids, and helping staff, I really feel encouraged and capable to handle my class better. Kung naa koy access sa mga seminars ug mga gamit nga makapa-improve sa learning sa mga bata, ma-inspire gyud ko. Makaingon ko nga mas empowered ko nga matabangan ang tanan nga estudyante, bisan pa man sa ilang kalainan. Pero kung kulang ang suporta ug materials, murag lisod kaayo. Usahay makabati ko nga limitado ra akong mahimo, labi na kung gusto unta nako nga matagaan ug parehas nga atensyon ang tanan. (When there are enough resources like training, visual aids, and helping staff, I really feel encouraged and capable of handling my class better. If I have access to seminars and materials that can improve children's learning, I am truly inspired. I can say that I am more empowered to help all students, even with their differences. But when support and materials are lacking, it becomes very difficult. Sometimes I feel that what I can do is limited, especially when I really want to give equal attention to all.). SH01_aud1_4:31.8

One participant stated that...

When resources such as professional development opportunities, specialized teaching tools, and additional support staff are readily accessible, I feel empowered to deliver quality and inclusive instruction. Kung naa koy access sa mga training, mga specialized materials, ug tabang gikan sa additional staff, mas confident ko ug mas motivated sa akong pagpanudlo. On the other hand, kung kulang ang mga resources, ma-feel nako nga limitado ang akong kakayahan sa paghatag sa kinahanglan nga suporta sa mga estudyante nga adunay lain-laing panginahanglan. Usahay, makapahuyang usab kini sa akong kumpiyansa ug motivation sa pagtudlo. (When resources such as professional development opportunities, specialized

teaching tools, and additional support staff are readily accessible, I feel empowered to deliver quality and inclusive instruction. If I have access to training, specialized materials, and help from additional staff, I become more confident and more motivated in my teaching. On the other hand, when resources are lacking, I feel that my ability to provide the needed support to students with diverse needs is limited. Sometimes, this also weakens my confidence and motivation to teach.). SH08_aud8_6:03.7

Amid these constraints, I came to appreciate the school heads' resilience and resourcefulness as they adapted, maximized available resources, and encouraged collaboration. Rather than being hindered, they remained flexible and refined their strategies to sustain inclusive practices, as one principal explained:

I place high importance on building partnerships with stakeholders because collaboration is key to successful inclusion. I believe that working together with parents, the community, and fellow teachers strengthens our ability to respond to every learner's needs. Gihatagan gyud nako ug dako nga bili ang pakig-partner sa mga stakeholders kay pinaagi sa panaghiusa, mas epektibo ang pagpatuman sa inclusive education. Knowing that I can count on the support of others empowers me to lead with confidence and push forward inclusive initiatives that ensure no learner is left behind. Kung kabalo ko nga naa koy kasaligan nga suporta gikan sa uban, mas lig-on ko ug mas determinado sa pagpasiugda sa mga programa nga walay estudyante nga mapabilin sa kilid. (I place high importance on building partnerships with stakeholders because collaboration is key to successful inclusion. I believe that working together with parents, the community, and fellow teachers strengthens our ability to respond to the needs of every learner. I truly value partnering with stakeholders because, through unity, the implementation of inclusive education becomes more effective. Knowing that I can count on the support of others empowers me to lead with confidence and push forward inclusive initiatives that ensure no learner is left behind. If I know that I have reliable support from others, I become stronger and more determined in promoting programs where no student is left behind.). SH07_aud7_6:43.1

One participant expressed that...

Parents' expectations strongly shape my decisions, particularly when they worry about their child's progress. Usahay lisod ipasabot, but I always remind myself that inclusion benefits all learners, not just a few. (Parents' expectations strongly influence my decisions, especially when they express concerns about their child's progress. At times, it is difficult to explain, but I always remind myself that inclusive education benefits all learners, not just a select few.). SH05_aud5_6:38.1

Drawing from their accounts, I noticed that as the participants smiled and nodded while sharing, I felt a sense of admiration for their resilience. Despite persistent resource shortages, school heads remained adaptive and resourceful, using collaboration and innovation to sustain inclusive practices, reflecting agile and purposeful leadership.

Intentions in Implementing the Inclusive Education Policy

Through my interviews, I learned that school heads enacted inclusive education through practices like co-teaching, differentiated instruction, parent involvement, and individualized support, making inclusion responsive to learners' needs, as one participant explained:

Decision-making becomes a collaborative process where all opinions are weighed carefully, and consensus is reached with the best interest of all learners in mind. SH04_aud4_8:16.4

One participant also shared...

Professional development ensures that teachers are confident, competent, and compassionate in delivering inclusive practices. SH02_aud2_3:47.7

I sense how participants' experiences reflected an evolving process that shaped their leadership and sense of responsibility. One leader expressed:

Inclusive education is not simply about integrating students with special needs into general classrooms but about fostering an environment where every student feels valued, supported, and able to thrive. SH03_aud3_6:31.5

From these views, inclusive education became clear to me. As a human, evolving responsibility is shaped by daily interactions and grounded in values of pakikipagkapwa (shared identity with others), malasakit (compassion), and bayanihan (community spirit).

Summary of the Findings

1. School heads view inclusive education as a value-driven and human-centered responsibility rooted in equity, justice, and respect for every learner.

2. The school head leadership was shaped by moral convictions and culturally grounded values that guided inclusive and compassionate practices.

3. The school head continuously explores the stakeholder expectations and resource limitations, demonstrating resilience, adaptability, and collaboration.

4. Implementing inclusive education transformed the school head leadership into a more flexible, reflective, and community-centered approach.

Modified Conceptual Framework

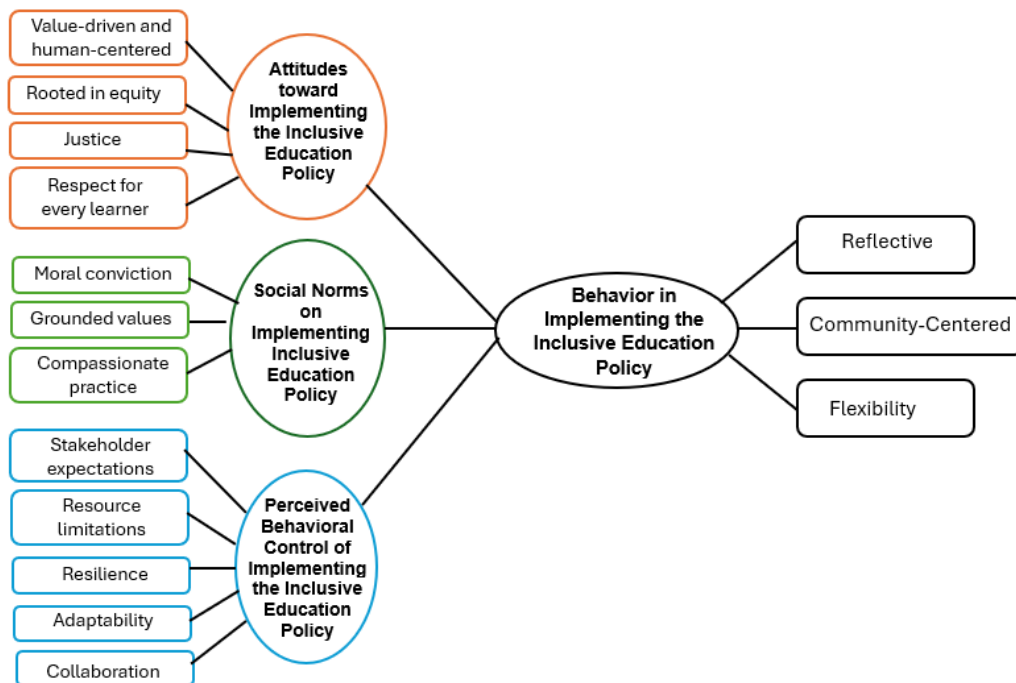


Fig. 1.2 The modified conceptual paradigm of the study.

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discussed the findings of my study including school head Attitudes, Social Norms, Perceived Behavior Control, and Intentions in implementing the inclusive policy.

Attitudes toward Implementing the Inclusive Education Policy

My findings revealed that school head attitudes view inclusive education as a value-driven and human-centered responsibility rooted in equity, justice, and respect for every learner. These claims align with Ainscow (2023) and Florian (2024), who highlighted that inclusive leadership is value-driven and shaped by educators' beliefs about learners' capabilities. Likewise, the participants' view of inclusion as a moral mission that fosters belonging and respects diversity reflects the perspectives of UNESCO (2023), emphasizing that inclusion thrives when embraced as a shared ethical commitment grounded in compassion, cultural awareness, and social justice.

Social Norms on Implementing Inclusive Education Policy

Based on the information I gathered, I came to realize that school leadership was shaped by moral convictions and culturally grounded values that guided inclusive and compassionate practices. These findings support David DeMatthews et al. (2023) and Umesh Sharma et al. (2024), who showed that social norms play a vital role in shaping leadership by transforming external expectations into opportunities for collaboration, shared responsibility, and stronger implementation of inclusive education.

Perceived Behavioral Control of Implementing the Inclusive Education Policy

Insights from the study showed that school continuously explores the stakeholder expectations and resource limitations, demonstrating resilience, adaptability, and collaboration. These assertions substantiate the findings of Lani Florian (2023) and Umesh Sharma et al. (2022), emphasizing adaptive leadership and strategic problem-solving, and highlighting that strong leadership and partnerships can mitigate the impact of resource constraints.

Behavior in Implementing the Inclusive Education Policy

My findings indicated that implementing inclusive education transformed school head leadership into a more flexible, reflective, and community-centered approach. This affirms the study of Umesh Sharma et al. (2024), emphasizing that strong leadership intentions drive the successful adoption of inclusive practices, and David DeMatthews et al. (2023), who highlighted that intentional leadership fosters collaborative and responsive school environments. Furthermore, UNESCO (2023) and Mel Ainscow (2022) noted that inclusive education becomes sustainable when leaders view it as a moral and collective responsibility embedded in school culture.

Implication for Practice

Based on my findings education officials may define and implement programs relevant to improving attitude and perceived behavioral control of school heads towards improving their behavior in implementing inclusive education policy. Likewise, education officials may initiate orientation activities that may lessen the social pressures on school heads concerning implementation of inclusive education policy. Finally, the school heads may engage in educational activities that will provide them moments for reflection, engage in community-centered activities, and develop their flexibility in improving their implementation of the inclusive education policy.

Future Directions

Based on findings, multiple linear regression analysis may be undertaken involving attitude, social norms, and perceived behavioral control on the implementation of inclusive education policy. Apart from that, exploratory factor analysis may also be pursued to develop questionnaires for attitude, social norms, and perceived behavioral control, and behavior in implementing inclusive education policy and use the corresponding emerging sub-themes as indicators of the potentially considered variables.

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