

Needs of learners with disability: inputs in promoting inclusive education

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the critical needs of learners with disabilities and their impact on promoting inclusive education. With the growing emphasis on creating equitable learning environments, it is essential to understand the unique challenges and requirements faced by learners with disabilities in the context of Caraga State University Cabadbaran Campus, an educational institution based in the Philippines. Through a sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach, which includes surveys of 900 participants out of 3,000 enrolled learners and interviews with 10 participants from 61 learners with disabilities based on the survey results, the study identified critical needs essential for their academic growth. These are academic needs, social integration and identity needs, preferred learning environment, peer support and learning assistance needs, inclusivity and equity needs, and a supportive learning environment. These needs suggest that a holistic approach integrating mental health, financial aid, inclusivity, peer assistance, and personalized learning can significantly improve the educational experiences of learners with disabilities, promoting a more equitable and supportive learning environment. These findings also serve as inputs to guide educational institutions toward more inclusive practices, ensuring that learners with disabilities are given equal opportunities to succeed academically. Addressing their needs contributes to the ongoing efforts to promote inclusive education in higher education institutions, fostering a more supportive and accommodating environment for all learners.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been a lot of emphasis on inclusive education as part and parcel of international commitment to ensure that all learners with disabilities and impairments have access to quality, equitable education. Inclusive education focuses on an environment to integrate learners with disabilities with mainstream education, benefiting from the same opportunities as peer learners. It aims to provide education to learners with disabilities, but also creates a culture of inclusion and ensures that all individuals in this society are valued and granted equal participation. International frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by the United Nations, especially Goal 4, have emphasized ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, with all individuals with disabilities having an equal right to access education. Despite these efforts,

students with disabilities remain barred from educational opportunities through the unavailability and inaccessibility of learning environments, inadequate or absent special support, as well as under-prepared teachers to apply teaching methods for inclusive education.

Recognizing the essential nature of inclusive education and the learning needs of the learners, various programs have been implemented in the country and administered by private and public schools. This specifically focuses on gifted education in public schools, concentrating on STEM programs, with some schools using enrichment activities and diverse instructional approaches. However, limited programs for learners with disabilities are only available for the arts, sports, leadership, and music disciplines. Campado *et al.* [1] identified the challenges in inclusive education within Philippine public schools, notably the absence of a national and official curriculum for gifted students and learners with disabilities. The need for a distinct "Filipino" curriculum model arises, necessitating the development of instructional and assessment tools suitable for potentially gifted students and learners with disabilities. Effective teaching requires a thorough understanding of the learning process, characteristics of students at different stages of development, individual factors that influence motivation, and procedures for maintaining orderly classrooms [2]. Hence, identifying the needs of exceptional learners and those with disabilities is challenging when admitted to the university.

Research on inclusive education highlights several critical components for successfully integrating learners with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. According to Pryor-Ramirez [3], inclusive teaching is supposed to be flexible in designing the curriculum, instruction methods, and assessment to accommodate a variety of learners. It calls for developing teachers' skills and access to resources that allow a learning environment to meet varied abilities while fostering social inclusivity among students [4]. Furthermore, the research studies recommend teacher training programs on disability awareness and inclusive pedagogies. Kazmi *et al.* [5] claim that teacher attitude towards inclusion is one of the most vital factors for successful working in the classroom environment. Such teachers, who are adequately prepared with education and training and through inclusion experience, will have more favorable attitudes and good teaching practices in learners with disabilities. There is another crucial role in the physical infrastructure of schools, which is also related to the whole philosophy of inclusive education.

Moreover, Shutaleva *et al.* [6] stated that most accommodations in schools fail to address physical barriers to support accessibility within the schools for learners with disabilities. One such accommodation has included the development of ramps, accessible washrooms, proper alignments of classrooms, and other related structures. It is only this accessible physical environment that can create a base-level foundation for inclusion.

Several empirical studies focused on how inclusive education is practiced within different contexts. For instance, a study by Olsson [7] suggested that the success of mainstream schools integrating learners with disabilities depends on how strong the country's legislative framework is and if the policy regarding inclusive education is clearly defined. Hence, the support of the government and policy makes inclusive practice. Williams *et al.* [8] conducted a study on the academic and social outcomes of learners with disabilities who were included in general education classrooms compared to those in segregated settings. Results showed that inclusive environments improve academic performance and enhance social skills and peer relationships, which are very important for the holistic development of learners with disabilities.

Despite the numerous studies on the topic of inclusive education, there is still a long way to go in discovering the needs of learners with disabilities in different regional contexts. Most of these studies are concentrated on developed nations with strong, reliable and effective educational systems and policies. However, there needs to be more concern about difficulties and adjustments to be created in developing countries, such as the Philippines, or districts with scarce resources and ill-prepared teachers' training processes. Moreover, there is limited empirical research in resource-constrained settings like the Philippines, where systemic barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, financial constraints, and insufficient teacher training persist. The novelty aspect of this study lies in its practical applicability in shaping localized inclusive education strategies. The study highlights mental health and financial struggles as significant but often overlooked barriers, suggesting that inclusive education must extend beyond physical accessibility to include emotional and economic support systems. By bridging the gap between global inclusive education frameworks and local realities, this research offers actionable insights for Philippine universities and similar institutions in developing regions, advocating for personalized, equity-driven approaches that ensure no learner is left behind.

In the context of Caraga State University Cabadbaran Campus, this research sought answers to the following questions:

- How many learners with disabilities are currently enrolled in the University?
- What are the different disabilities of learners that are dominant in their personal information?

- What are the critical needs of learners with disabilities that need to be addressed by the University in support of inclusive education?

To address the identified research problems and gaps, this study was conducted to identify specific challenges faced by learners with disabilities in underrepresented contexts. It also identified the input that needs to push forward localized inclusive education. This end would be served by further exploring the prevalence and the nature of disability among the learners at Caraga State University Cabadbaran Campus. The study would also help understand the problems faced by learners with disabilities and what areas need improvement by educational institutions for proper support and accommodation. This would ensure that learners with disabilities get the appropriate support and accommodations to succeed academically and socially.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study's sequential exploratory mixed-methods design captures the quantitative and qualitative approaches used to determine the research problem. This dual-method strategy permits a further critical engagement with the complexities surrounding the best research question to be explored in detail [9]. This is a sequential design method that involves two phases. Phase one was the survey of the quantitative data, which was the number of learners with disabilities enrolled at Caraga State University Cabadbaran Campus. Qualitative data was gathered by doing one-on-one interviews. The qualitative phase was based on the findings from the quantitative phase. It provided for the qualitative investigation of the social and academic needs of the learners with disabilities within the inclusive education framework, and the elements of exploratory or narrative inquiry were added to capture the participants' subjective perspectives and experiences as learners with disabilities.

2.2. Research instrument

The study utilized a survey questionnaire named students' personal information (SPIn) that intends to gather comprehensive data about the students for academic and administrative purposes. It has two primary sections. Part I: general information collects personal details such as name, status, contact information, demographics, and academic background. It asks questions regarding civil status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE), and whether the student is a beneficiary of specific programs like Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4P's). It also gives consideration to familial and living conditions, entrance exam scores, and extracurricular achievement.

Part II: identifying specific needs involves determining any kind of disability requiring some form of accommodation in academics or support. These could be physical, mental, intellectual, or learning disabilities and their corresponding needs for support. Open-ended questions to elicit experiences, challenges, and long-term goals from learners were also added. Lastly, the survey questionnaire has a data privacy notice, which guarantees the confidentiality of the information that was given and complies with the Philippines Data Privacy Act of 2012. The student participants then confirmed their consent by affixing their signature.

2.3. Instrument validity and reliability

Based on the expert's evaluation, the research questionnaire demonstrates strong content validity as it comprehensively assesses student demographics, disabilities, and support needs, while its construct validity is supported by well-structured disability classifications aligned with medical and educational standards. Reliability was enhanced by employing a mixed-methods approach using standardized checklists for objective disability identification alongside open-ended questions for personalized insights, which improves consistency while capturing individual experiences.

To control confounding variables, the researchers apply several key techniques: i) demographic stratification (e.g., age, socioeconomic status via 4Ps beneficiary data) isolates disability-related needs from external influences; ii) standardized disability categories [e.g., diagnostic and statistical manual (DSM)-aligned classifications for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)] reduce self-reporting bias; iii) structured skip logic ("if yes, specify") ensures relevant follow-up responses; and iv) balanced quantitative and qualitative items minimize response variability. The researchers also introduced some refinements, such as adding validation checks (e.g., confirming formal diagnoses) and pilot-testing ambiguous terms (e.g., "intellectual functioning"), which strengthens precision. Overall, the research questionnaire effectively balances validity, reliability, and confounding variable control, making it a versatile tool for assessing learners with disabilities' needs in adherence to inclusive education with minor adjustments, optimizing its analytical rigor.

2.4. Sampling and data gathering procedure

Stratified sampling was used to select a diverse range of participants from approximately 3,000 enrolled higher education students from various demographic backgrounds and educational levels that comprise the total population. Nine hundred sample participants were selected out of the total undergraduate population. They were asked to answer a questionnaire called SPIIn, and their answers form part of the quantitative data. On the qualitative part, purposive sampling was utilized, where age, gender, academic discipline, year level, and types of disabilities were considered when selecting the participants to ensure a comprehensive representation of the different needs of the learners with disabilities.

For the qualitative part, a total of 10 participants with varied disabilities were selected for one-on-one semi-structured interviews from a pool of 61 participants with disabilities, based on the survey results. While there are no hard and fast rules regarding the number of participants who should be involved in qualitative research, some researchers have validated that 10 participants are already sufficient, depending on the type of research and the research question [10]. The researchers gathered data over a span of six weeks. An interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions was developed to probe perspectives, attitudes, challenges, and experiences related to the needs of learners with disabilities. In addition to the data collection methods discussed above, other methods, such as participant observation, focus groups, or document analysis, were employed to triangulate the findings and provide greater depth to the understanding. To gather rich, qualitative data on the needs and experiences of learners with disabilities, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants. Before the study began, all participants provided informed consent, ensuring they clearly understood the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits associated with participating in the study. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time as participants during the study's conduct. Data was anonymized, and the participants' confidentiality was assured through pseudonyms and safe and secure data storage. All ethical principles and guidelines were strictly adhered to during the research. This means there is respect for the participant's autonomy, beneficence, and justice.

2.5. Data analysis and limitations

The researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the interviews and other sources. We also described the participants' characteristics through frequency and percentages in terms of age, gender, field of academics, year level, and type of disability. In the qualitative part of the study, learners' interviews and audio records were transcribed and analyzed using the thematic method. The treatment process includes transcription, coding, and categorization through themes. The iterative coding, categorization, and interpretation process was applied to identify recurring themes, patterns, and variations in participants' narratives. Reflexive data interpretation was engaged, critically examining the findings in relation to existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and the broader socio-cultural context. Key insights and implications from the data analysis were synthesized to develop a coherent narrative that sheds light on the learners' unique needs based on the perspectives of the participants with disabilities.

This study is subject to several limitations. The generalizability of findings may be constrained by sample size and representativeness. Data collection methods, such as surveys and interviews, may introduce biases or limit the depth of information gathered. Additionally, participant factors like social desirability bias, recall bias, and dropout rates can affect data accuracy [11], [12].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 provides an overview of the frequency and percentage of learners reporting a disability. Its status was based on their SPIIn, which they filled out during the survey conducted. The cumulative percentages show that nearly all students (98.8%) responded either "no" or "yes" to the disability question, with only a tiny portion opting for "prefer not to say".

Table 1. Frequency of learners with a disability based on their SPIIn

With disability	Counts	% of total	Cumulative %
No	828	92.0	92.0
Yes	61	6.8	98.8
Prefer not to say	11	1.2	100.0

Out of all the sample participants, 92.0% said they had no physical disability, 6.8% indicated that they did, and 1.2% preferred not to say their status regarding physical disability. Knowing these statistics would enable educational institutions to provide provisions for inclusive and accessible environments for learners. Of course, knowing the specific needs of learners with disabilities is also essential to ensure effective planning and proper implementation of instruction. Several researchers have pointed out the factors

that influence the learning experiences of learners with disabilities, ranging from the individual's characteristics to the nature of the disability and the quality of educational support received [13], [14]. Understanding factors can help educators develop individualized strategies for each student in ways sensitive to their needs and foster academic achievement. Besides their academic needs, the social and emotional care of learners with disabilities is also essential. Inclusive education has been found to positively affect social inclusion and self-concept among learners with disabilities. For instance, developing a sense of belonging in an embracing environment through an inclusive classroom may develop an atmosphere of respect for one another where children with all types of disability feel valued [15], [16].

3.1. Individual interview of person with disability learners

The image below is a word cloud that visualizes various terms extracted during in-depth interviews relating to challenges faced by learners with disability at the University. The larger the word, the more frequently it appears in the data set. This word cloud reflects diverse and interconnected issues related to student life, with a strong emphasis on mental health, financial struggles, and the need for various forms of support (emotional, academic, and social), as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The word cloud using the codes during in-depth interviews of learners with disability

The word cloud highlights several critical themes that significantly affect learners, educational institutions, and policymakers. Mental health emerges as a dominant concern, emphasizing the need for institutions to prioritize psychological support through counseling, peer support systems, and stress management resources. With increasing student anxiety and mental health issues, attention is now more and more focused on building learning environments, communities, and institutions that will allow the development of learners' full potential [17]. The costs are also burdensome. Even terms like "scholarship" and "tuition" indicate the strain of climbing education costs, thus pushing for increased financial aid packages and low-cost education options [18]. Inclusivity and diversity issues indicate that most learners have experienced alienation or exclusion, hence the need for an institution to promote a culture of belonging by promoting equal opportunities, curricula, and other social structures that can sustain them. Academic pressure has been reflected in words like "work" and "challenges", indicating the amount of work and the nature of challenges involved, urging more flexible policies in institutions with tutoring and a reduced workload [19]. Emotional support would prove equally important, but a lack thereof leads to isolation, affecting even performance. Thus, importance should be attached to peers holding mentorship roles and opening doors toward emotional support [20]. Support for learners in universities with disabilities also plays an important role. Learners face different challenges but equally require different resources with modifications to level the playing field. These themes further reflect online integration challenges, mainly after the pandemic, which suggests that institutions must further strengthen digital infrastructure support for remote and hybrid learning [21]. Such interrelated issues, therefore, warrant a more holistic approach that combines mental health, financial support, inclusivity, and flexible academic policies to foster a healthier, more equitable educational environment for all learners.

3.1.1. Learners with disabilities' academic challenges

Higher learning education has a significant proportion of learners with disabilities, and their major academic challenges occur in the interviews and group focus discussions. They encompass educational opportunities, particular subjects to study, and processes applied when submitting work. The complexity level of higher learning can be too demanding. For learners with disability, this might imply that the curriculum is not well-suited to respond to their needs. This will affect academic progression [22]. To this end, institutions should ensure that curricula are inclusive and that course content and materials are accessible to all types of learners. To academic challenges, the subjects highlighted in the responses given by the participants were drafting and other subjects, meaning that these subjects require special attention. The way to address these issues is to provide special tutoring services, accessible learning materials, and accommodations to learners with disabilities. Finally, this category needs to be corrected concerning online submissions and even deadlines. As reflected by the statement, "*I find it difficult to submit requirements online due to unstable internet connectivity,*" a learner can possibly face problems in the logistics procedure for submitting requirements online in the midst of handling coursework successfully.

These will call for flexible policies as far as submissions are concerned. There should be support as far as the submission process itself being done online is concerned, mainly because this will involve offering such extensions of deadlines to those in need of it with their disabilities. With the assistance of targeted interventions and alterations, these institutions can effectively alter the academic experience of learners with disabilities and their subsequent success rate. An inclusive and supportive learning environment is critical in generating equity so that everyone is given a fair shot at attaining their best potential.

3.1.2. Learners with disabilities' social integration and identity needs

Insights into the experiences of learners with disabilities through social integration and identity give various themes and categories that define the difficulties and triumphs that occur in their lives due to socialization. Social integration and identity provide insights into how people deal with their social surroundings and discover who they are. Empowered by social integration, one dominant code is how intelligence becomes a social good [23]. Indeed, these findings are a good source of social inclusion and identity experiences for learners with disabilities. Significant themes that emerged include the influence of a positive social environment. Social and emotional well-being reflects a general sense of belonging and acceptance. The statement, "*Wala ko gi bully, nakafeel ko sa among balay na gi pangga ko, gi accept kos akong mga classmate ug happy ko kanang mag garagara (I was not bullied; I feel loved at our home, my classmates accept me, and I'm happy when we joke around),*" reveals that not being bullied and feeling accepted both at home and among classmates is what dramatically contributes to emotional well-being and happiness. Overall, these themes and statements indicate that intelligence, proactive engagement, character acceptance, family support, and favorable social settings will all affect the social inclusion and identity of learners with disabilities. Improvement in the social interactional experiences and quality of life for learners with disabilities could be achieved by addressing the factors mentioned above.

These results are of value to teachers, decision-makers, and community leaders. Schools and other educational establishments should be conducive environments for diversity and social acceptance. Extracurricular activities should be available to every learner, irrespective of disability, to enable social inclusivity and development. Families need to be supported and socialized to accept their children who have disabilities in them so that their self-esteem and confidence can improve. Communities should abolish stigma and discrimination towards people with disabilities and, therefore, foster environments where each learner is valued and treated respectfully. By dealing with these factors, the quality of social life of learners with disabilities shall improve significantly.

3.1.3. Learners with disabilities' learning environment preferences

Essentially, the learning environment preferences discussion provides insight into how learners with disabilities navigate educational and social settings and specifies critical challenges that demand thoughtful interventions. Under the preference for face-to-face learning, it is written, "*Sa online classroom maglisud ko, face-to-face akong ganahan kay tung COVID-19-time galisud kog maayo (I struggle in online classrooms; I prefer face-to-face because, during the COVID-19 period, I had a tough time).*" This preference for in-person learning, particularly following the disruptions of the pandemic, suggests that face-to-face environments may provide better support, accessibility, and engagement for some learners with disabilities. The implication is that educational institutions must consider more inclusive and accessible online learning formats or provide flexible face-to-face options to cater to diverse needs.

The category of social challenges highlights the ongoing issue of peer interactions, specifically bullying. The experience of bullying, as reflected in the statement, "*Usahay nabully ko sa uban, masakitan ko usahay, dili nko ibutang sa hunahuna pasagdan ra sila (Sometimes I get bullied by others, it hurts me, but I try not to think about it and ignore them),*" points to the significant emotional toll bullying can take on

individuals with disabilities. While attempts are made to brush off these negative behaviors, the emotional impact can affect self-esteem, mental well-being, and social integration [24]. The implication here is the urgent need for anti-bullying initiatives and better support systems within educational settings to foster safer and more inclusive social environments for learners with disabilities.

In the context of trust issues with friendly people, the statement, "*There are some people who are friendly to us, but in return, they will backstab us,*" emphasizes the difficulty in establishing genuine trust. While cordial interaction is desirable, the risk of being betrayed adds complexity to developing interpersonal relationships. The essence then lies in nurturing trust within interpersonal interactions, which will play a more vital role, especially for people with disabilities, since their ability to create bonds will be affected in other dimensions. The suggestion here is that education settings and social environments should aim at building trust and fostering it through programs aimed at building empathy, communicating effectively, and showing respect towards others.

As the sub-themes demonstrate, the challenges of learners with disabilities in learning settings are manifold. There is an increasing need to tailor approaches in terms of being more accessible to social support, and not forgetting to create trust strategies for these settings. It, therefore, becomes a setting in educational environments, making the study environment welcoming and successful on both social and academic planes.

3.1.4. Learners with disabilities, peer support and learning assistance

Interviews conducted revealed a lot of insight into the life experiences of learners with disabilities, especially with regard to peer support and learning assistance, and how these create paths in education and their social lives. This presents evidence that the role played by peer networks and environments that support play an essential part in the success of learners with disabilities in academics and emotional well-being. The statement "*Tabangan ko sa akong mga classmate basta diko makasabut, tudluan ko nila para makasabut ko, ug emotional ko basta tabangan ko nila (My classmates help me when I do not understand, they teach me so I can understand, and I get emotional when they help me),*" under the category of peer support and learning assistance is the dual role of the classmate, which involves academic support and emotional comfort. This peer support can help a learner cope with the problems of learning and emotional issues, which is, therefore, essential for learners with disabilities in their education. This means that schools should encourage and support structures for peer support, allowing learners to cope with academic understanding and emotional resilience. Schools may have formal peer mentoring practices or cooperative learning techniques to support this kind of mutual helping; the learner is likely to experience better learning experiences through such ideas.

Talent recognition in an inclusive environment is another important finding. Statement: "*Daghan talented, guitarist ko, magkasinabut mis classroom ug daghan koy friend bali inclusive mis classroom (There are many talents; I am a guitar player, and we get along well in class, thus I have so many friends in my classroom, very inclusive).*" This feeling of inclusion, developed through identifying talent and excellent peer connections, makes learners with disabilities feel appreciated and part of the classroom. This means that the learners feel included when the school creates an atmosphere where the students' academics, art, or other skills are appreciated. The aim should be to make every classroom a place that focuses on diversity in talent, where each child is valued equally.

It makes the well-being of learners with disabilities higher because bullying and exclusion do not exist in this open environment. Such healthy friendships and the absence of bullying support learners' personal growth and academic development as they allow them to succeed with friends. The message is loud: schools must focus more on academic support and build a safe and inclusive environment in which bullying in schools can be actively prevented and learners are made sensitive and cooperative. The school system does this by setting policies that do not support bullying and a generally positive school culture.

In summary, peer support and a supportive learning environment are necessary for the accomplishment of academically and socially disabled individuals. Building an environment conducive to individual well-being and educational success is accomplished by combining the emotional and academic support from peers with a value setting on individual abilities while promoting positive relationships [25]. Emotional peer support systems improve learner-to-learner connections while also allowing children and adolescents to participate in school. These suggest that peer support systems should be fostered and promoted within educational institutions, and the student body should be created with an inclusive environment in order to enhance the social and academic performances of learners with disabilities [26].

3.1.5. Learners with disabilities, inclusivity, and equity

Insights from participants about inclusion and equity have shed light on considerable fields of progress and gap issues across the educational system for learners with disabilities. Their experiences shed light on broader policies and attitudes, such as the importance of financial support, equal treatment, and

personalized learning approaches. A key finding concerns financial inclusivity: the above statement, "*The policy of 'no one is left behind' saves those students financially, but not all of us, but we should find other ways as individuals,*" gives a hint of the benefits of inclusive financial policies that aid in easing the financial burdens that some learners face. However, at the same time, that also allows for a limitation in such policies since they only meet the needs of some of these learners. This implies that if broad financial support programs are helpful, they must be accompanied by more differentiated solutions to every learner's unique financial problem. This may include targeted scholarships, grants, or additional financial aid explicitly tailored to learners with disabilities, since they might face exceptionally high costs associated with their higher education.

Another important issue on the list of inclusivity and equity is equal treatment and dignity. The statement, "*Students should be treated as equals, regardless of their disabilities. They should not be belittled or reminded of the disability they have,*" conveys an implicit implication that means that institutions of education, as well as their employees, have to make sure that learners with disabilities are not identified or defined by their impairment. It requires attitudinal change and ensures equality for all learners is met without diminishing dignity or constantly bringing their disability to their attention. Schools should also highlight education for respect, and teachers and other employees should refrain from using language and conduct that make a learner seem inferior [27].

Another domain that contains principles for personalized learning practices is the theme of unique approaches that promote inclusiveness. In the declaration, "*Tabangan ko sa akong mga klasmet basta diko makasabut, tudluan ko nila para makasabut ko, ug emotional ko basta tabangan ko nila (My classmates help me whenever I don't understand something; they teach me so I can understand, and I get emotional when they help me),*" implies peer assistance and support not only for academic success but also for emotional support. This emphasizes the learner-centred adaptive learning approaches that need to be adopted for learners with disabilities. Such finding implies that learning institutions should invest in the personalization of learning among learners with disabilities through peer tutoring schemes, different teaching models, or assistive technologies that make it possible for all learners to learn through access to the curriculum in ways that support their unique learning styles and preferences.

The abovementioned findings, therefore, go on to indicate that although inclusivity policies such as aid and general support measures are of value, they are too limited and need to be supplemented with more pervasive and more targeted forms of support systems to address the needs and specific problems faced by learners with disabilities. This can be highly achieved in making learners with disabilities enjoy their academic and social experiences if there is a shift in social attitudes toward equal treatment practices. Blended personalized learning approaches will heighten enjoyment by elevating the educational experience's dignity and equity in educational institutions [28].

3.1.6. Learners with disabilities: supportive learning environment

The disability support theme reveals critical dimensions concerning proper treatment and personal issues that learners face with disabilities, and it sheds light on how such factors affect their academic and personal lives. The learners should be treated as equals without being reminded of their disability. Each of us is unique in unique ways, which illustrates the fundamental principle of fair treatment. It speaks about the need for an educational environment where learners with disabilities are not defined by their limitations but recognized for their unique qualities and potential. This implies that schools should be institutions capable of creating cultures where learners are appreciated for their uniqueness and diversity. The practice develops a sense of belonging to enable equal, fair opportunities for learners with disabilities to succeed academically and socially. Moving away from the deficit-based understanding of disability enables educators to focus on the strengths and what the learner can achieve and contribute, calling for anti-stigmatization training for teachers and peers in the context of a supportive learning environment.

In light of personal struggle and determination, the statement "*I have many doubts because of my syndrome, but I tried my best,*" reflects the inner struggles that learners with disabilities face as they battle with self-doubts and uncertainty associated with the condition. However, it also shows a level of strength and tenacity in pursuing their goals despite the challenges. Here, it is assumed that though learners who experience various disabilities and ailments are motivated more often by their commitment towards countering adversity, an appropriate dose of emotional and psychological aid is needed through counseling and mentoring in dealing with this aspect of personal conflict. Schools' ought to provide facilities such as counseling support services and mentoring plans to strengthen the will of their learners to handle doubts and build self-confidence and efficacy. Equal to academic accommodations is the acknowledgement and support of their emotional resilience [29].

The findings highlighted two critical factors of disability support. These are fair and just treatments and recognitions of the actual personal struggles and zeal of learners. Consequently, such disability support enhances the learning experiences of learners with disabilities in educational institutions [30], [31].

4. CONCLUSION

This study provides critical, actionable insights into the challenges faced by learners with disabilities, revealing systemic gaps in mental health support, financial accessibility, inclusive pedagogy, and peer-assisted learning. The findings urgently call for institutional reforms, emphasizing that mental well-being must be prioritized through campus-wide counseling services, peer-led support groups, and stress-reduction programs tailored to students with disabilities. Financial barriers are a recurring theme that demands immediate policy interventions, such as expanded scholarships, subsidized assistive technologies, and low-cost learning materials, to ensure equitable access.

The research underscores that inclusivity cannot be achieved without structural changes: flexible assignment submissions, adaptive tutoring, and universally designed instructional materials are non-negotiable for academic equity. Social integration and identity development further highlight the need for anti-bullying initiatives, inclusive extracurricular programs, and family-inclusive support systems to foster belonging. Notably, the preference for face-to-face learning post-pandemic challenges universities to rethink hybrid models, ensuring digital accessibility does not compromise engagement.

Beyond diagnosis, this study serves as a blueprint for transformative action. Future research must translate these findings into measurable interventions, including longitudinal studies on mental health programs, cost-effective financial aid models, and culturally responsive teaching strategies. By addressing these gaps, educational institutions can move beyond compliance to genuine empowerment, ensuring that learners with disabilities thrive, not just survive, in higher education. The time for inclusive education reform is now, and this research provides the evidence to drive it forward.

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This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : Conceptualization

I : Investigation

Vi : Visualization

M : Methodology

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this research, whether personal, financial, ideological, political, cultural, or academic, that could influence the results or publication of this article.

INFORMED CONSENT

The authors obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The University currently does not have an institutional ethics board, but it has a Research, Innovation, and Extension Office, which serves as an equivalent committee for research approval. Research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations, including the data privacy law of the Philippines and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the Office of Research, Innovation, and Extension (ORIE). The scholarly work for this research has undergone a rigorous review and evaluation by the experts from ORIE and has been approved by the University President through the recommendation of the Vice President for Research, Innovation, and Extension. The above mechanism for approval ultimately aligns with journal guidelines for ethical oversight.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author, [JOE]. The data, which contains information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, is not publicly available due to certain restrictions from the data privacy law of the Philippines.

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