

Best teaching practices in special education in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined best teaching practices in United States special education through the experiences of Filipino special education teachers currently working in the United States. Semi-structured interviews generated rich insights into practices perceived as most effective in meeting the diverse needs of students with disabilities. A practice was considered “best” when it aligned with the individuals with disabilities education act (IDEA) and the Americans with disabilities act (ADA) requirements, demonstrated evidence-based effectiveness, reflected cultural responsiveness, and was validated through teachers lived experiences. Using Braun and Clarke’s six-phase thematic analysis, five themes emerged: data-driven instruction and curriculum, systematic special education processes, inclusive instructional strategies and learning environments, comprehensive student support services, and empowered teacher support and development. These findings highlight the importance of structured systems, collaborative practices, and sustained professional learning in delivering equitable and high-quality special education. The study recommends adopting data-driven and standards-based approaches, strengthening inclusive models, expanding related services, and investing in ongoing professional development. These insights offer practical guidance for enhancing instructional effectiveness and advancing inclusive education in diverse contexts, including the Philippines.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Special education provides individualized instruction to students with diverse learning needs, abilities, and developmental profiles [1]. Although global efforts have advanced instructional practices, research identifying the most effective methods for improving outcomes for learners with disabilities remains limited [2]. This gap underscores the need to examine practices that consistently support student growth and can be adapted across educational settings.

The United States is widely regarded as a leader in special education, supported by strong legal frameworks, extensive resources, and well-established systems of service delivery [3]. Studying United States best practices is therefore valuable, particularly for countries seeking to strengthen their own special education programs. Understanding which practices are effective, and why, can inform scalable approaches that enhance instruction, support, and services elsewhere.

In the Philippines, the demand for improved special education services continues to grow [4]. Filipino special education teachers working in the United States occupy a unique position: they navigate two educational systems and bring firsthand knowledge of evidence-based, culturally responsive, and legally

grounded instructional practices [5]. Their experiences offer practical insights that can enrich Philippine special education and guide future program development.

This study examines best teaching practices in United States special education as perceived by Filipino special education teachers. In this research, best practices refer to instructional methods, strategies, and systems that align with federal mandates such as the individuals with disabilities education act (IDEA) and the Americans with disabilities act (ADA), demonstrate evidence-based effectiveness, and reflect cultural responsiveness. These practices are identified not only through established criteria but also through the lived experiences of Filipino teachers who apply them in real classroom settings. Their perspectives provide grounded validation that these approaches support meaningful learning outcomes and offer actionable strategies that can inform instructional improvement and innovation in the Philippines and other contexts.

2. THE COMPREHENSIVE THEORETICAL AND LEGAL BASIS

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks, social learning theory (SLT) and culturally responsive teaching (CRT), and anchored in the legal mandates that shape United States special education, particularly the IDEA and the ADA. Together, these theoretical and legal foundations provide a coherent lens for understanding effective, inclusive, and equitable teaching practices for students with disabilities. Bandura and Walter's SLT [6] posits that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modeling. In special education, structured modeling delivered through verbal instruction, live demonstrations, or symbolic representations has been shown to improve academic and behavioral outcomes for students with disabilities [7]. SLT also emphasizes learning environments that mirror real-life social contexts, supporting emotional regulation, communication, and interpersonal skills [8]. Practices such as peer modeling and teacher-led reinforcement further promote inclusion and reduce social isolation [9].

CRT complements SLT by integrating students' cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds into instruction. CRT promotes engagement, equity, and meaningful participation, critical in increasingly diverse United States special education classrooms [10]. It encourages teachers to build culturally affirming relationships, adapt instructional materials, and create inclusive learning environments [11]. Research also links teacher self-efficacy in CRT to professional preparation, particularly in bilingual, ESL, and special education contexts [12].

These theoretical perspectives operate within a strong legal framework. IDEA mandates a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and requires the development of individualized education programs (IEPs) tailored to each student's needs [13]. It promotes inclusive practices, collaborative planning, and systematic progress monitoring [14], though effective implementation depends on teacher preparedness, resources, and administrative support [15]. The ADA complements IDEA by prohibiting discrimination based on disability and ensuring equal access, reasonable accommodations, and inclusive practices across educational settings [16]. Despite these protections, challenges such as inconsistent access to services and systemic inequities persist.

Together, SLT, CRT, IDEA, and ADA form an integrated foundation for examining best teaching practices in United States special education. The theories explain how students learn through modeled behaviors and culturally responsive interactions, while the laws ensure that instruction is equitable, individualized, and legally protected. This combined framework guides the study in identifying practices that move beyond compliance to foster meaningful inclusion, engagement, and achievement for students with disabilities.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the best teaching practices in special education in the United States, as perceived by Filipino special education teachers. A qualitative descriptive design is appropriate for studies aiming to provide a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those involved [17]. This approach allows for a detailed and straightforward account of participants' experiences without the need for complex interpretations or theoretical frameworks. In this study, a practice was considered "best" if it was identified by participants as effective in addressing the diverse needs of students with disabilities, while also reflecting alignment with established standards such as IDEA, ADA, cultural responsiveness, and evidence-based instructional approaches.

3.2. Research participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling [18], targeting Filipino special education teachers currently teaching in the United States. Inclusion criteria required participants to have a minimum of two years of teaching experience in United States special education programs and to be actively engaged in teaching

students with disabilities. The final sample consisted of 10 participants representing both public and private schools across different states. The detailed demographic profile of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning that no new themes or significant insights emerged from the later interviews. This ensured that the sample size was sufficient to capture the range of experiences relevant to the study objectives. Although the sample size of 10 participants may appear limited, qualitative descriptive research prioritizes depth and richness of data over numerical representativeness, aiming to provide detailed insights into participants' experiences [19]. Purposive sampling ensured that participants had direct experience and expertise in United States special education, supporting the relevance and credibility of the findings. Previous qualitative studies in special education have successfully drawn substantive conclusions with sample sizes ranging from 6 to 15 participants [20]. Therefore, the sample size is considered adequate to explore the research objectives and generate meaningful insights regarding best teaching practices in special education.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

Participant ID	Years of experience	School type	State	Grade level
P1	14	Public	Texas	Elementary
P2	16	Public	Virginia	Middle school
P3	11	Public	Texas	Elementary
P4	10	Public	New Mexico	High school
P5	12	Public	Arizona	Elementary
P6	19	Public	Virginia	High school
P7	15	Public	North Carolina	Middle school
P8	12	Public	California	High school
P9	8	Public	South Dakota	Elementary
P10	10	Public	Hawaii	High school

3.3. Research instruments

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide, developed based on current literature on evidence-based practices in special education and culturally responsive teaching [21]. It was validated by experts in special education and cross-cultural pedagogy. The guide featured open-ended questions designed to elicit in-depth insights from participants across key thematic areas, including instructional strategies used in inclusive classrooms, adaptations for students with diverse learning needs, the application of culturally responsive pedagogy, challenges encountered in United States special education settings, and perceptions of best practices that may be adapted to the Philippine context. Sample questions included, "Can you describe a teaching strategy you find most effective for students with disabilities?" and "How do you adapt your instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse learners?" To ensure the reliability and appropriateness of the tool, the interview guide was reviewed and validated by two experts in the field of special education and subsequently revised based on their feedback for clarity, cultural sensitivity, and contextual relevance.

3.4. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions. These methods allowed for flexibility and depth in data gathering, as participants were encouraged to share detailed insights while also engaging in peer discussion for collaborative reflection [22]. All sessions were conducted via secure video conferencing platforms due to geographic constraints and were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent. Transcripts were prepared verbatim for accuracy.

3.5. Data analysis

The transcribed data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's [23] six-phase method: i) familiarization with data, ii) generating initial codes, iii) searching for themes, iv) reviewing themes, v) defining and naming themes, and vi) producing the report. This approach enabled the identification of recurring teaching strategies, beliefs, and values shaping participants' definitions of best practice. Independent coding by the researchers and consensus-building meetings were done to resolve discrepancies. Audit trails, saturation mapping, and reflexive journaling ensured methodological dependability. Trustworthiness and credibility were reinforced with member checking, peer debriefing, and explicit researcher positionality statements.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. All participants received informed consent forms outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality measures in place. All procedures followed the American Psychological Association's ethical

guidelines, ensuring informed consent, participant confidentiality, and secure data storage throughout the research process.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides a comprehensive analysis of the study's focus, incorporating participants' responses supported by relevant literature. The findings are organized by themes and presented in table format, with each theme accompanied by a detailed discussion. Tables 2 through 5 present data on best practices in special education in the United States.

4.1. Best teaching practices in special education in the United States

As Filipino teachers navigate their responsibilities as special education teachers in the United States, they have encountered and experienced practices they consider best practices for making their work more effective and efficient. The themes presented in this section represent practices that Filipino special education teachers consistently perceived as most effective in their United States teaching experience. Within this study, such perceptions served as the basis for identifying 'best practices,' understood as strategies that both conform to professional and legal standards and demonstrate observable effectiveness in real classroom contexts. These best practices are organized into five major themes with sub-themes, which are presented in Tables 2 to 5 along with their descriptions.

4.1.1. Theme 1: data-driven instruction and curriculum

Instruction and curriculum are central to student learning, particularly in special education where individualized support is essential. Participant narratives consistently highlighted data-driven instruction and curriculum alignment as one of the strongest and most effective practices in United States special education. Students with disabilities receive instruction aligned with state and district standards, and their progress is monitored through multiple data sources, including classroom assessments, curriculum-based measures, and district or state evaluations. These data inform instructional decisions, guide individualized education program (IEP) development, and ensure accountability across learning environments. This theme consists of three sub-themes: *Adopting a data-driven instruction, implementing a standards-based curriculum, and measuring success through standardized testing.*

Table 2. Data-driven-instruction and curriculum

Sub-theme	Description
Adopting a data-driven instruction	Using data to inform teaching practices and assess student progress
Implementing a standards-based curriculum	Aligning instruction with state or national standards to ensure students with disabilities meet expected academic benchmarks
Measuring success through standardized testing	Assessing the academic performance of students with disabilities through standardized assessments to ensure educational goals are being met

a. Sub-theme 1: adopting a data-driven instruction

Data-driven instruction is a widely recognized practice that uses continuous analysis of student performance to guide teaching strategies [24]. Teachers draw on formative and summative assessments, as well as qualitative observations, to understand student growth and identify areas requiring targeted intervention. This approach is particularly valuable for students with disabilities, whose learning needs often vary across academic and behavioral domains. One participant explained:

“Our school is data-driven. For example, a child can only transfer to a mainstream classroom if their test results qualify them. If so, during the addendum meeting, their placement will be changed or they will be dismissed from special education.” (P7)

Recent studies support these observations. Summers [25] found that teachers who consistently use data to inform instruction report improved learning outcomes, including higher engagement and achievement among students with disabilities. Similarly, Anwar *et al.* [26] emphasize that systematic data use enables timely interventions and effective progress monitoring.

This continuous cycle of assessment, reflection, and instructional adjustment ensures that teaching remains responsive to student needs. Filipino special education teachers in the United States noted that data-driven instruction enhances instructional quality, empowers teachers to make informed decisions, and supports student success. They expressed interest in applying similar practices in the Philippines, recognizing the potential for scalable, evidence-based approaches to improve learning outcomes for students with special needs.

b. Sub-theme 2: implementing a standards-based curriculum

A standard-based curriculum, mandated by federal and state guidelines, is another key practice in United States special education [27]. This framework outlines the skills and competencies all students, including those with disabilities, are expected to achieve. Aligning instruction with these standards ensures purposeful, goal-oriented teaching and promotes consistency across classrooms.

Research supports the benefits of standards-aligned instruction. Swain *et al.* [28] found that aligning instruction with standards improves academic outcomes for students with disabilities and provides a clear structure for individualized support. Williams [29] similarly notes that standards-based curricula help teachers maintain high expectations while accommodating diverse learning needs. Participants echoed these findings:

“I make sure that my instruction is aligned with the standards set for their grade level. This means that, while I adapt lessons to meet the needs of students with disabilities, I’m also ensuring that what they’re learning is in line with state and national education standards.” (P3)

This structured approach benefits students by providing a consistent learning framework while allowing teachers to tailor instruction. Filipino special education teachers expressed interest in promoting standards-based practices in the Philippines, noting that such frameworks could strengthen instructional coherence, equity, and accountability.

c. Sub-theme 3: measuring success through standardized testing

Standardized state assessments are a key practice for measuring student progress and ensuring alignment with academic standards [30]. These tests, covering core subjects like math, English language arts, science, and social studies, serve as benchmarks for grade-level advancement and high school graduation eligibility. According to the Ajiga *et al.* [31] standardized tests provide essential information for students, parents, educators, and policymakers, aiding in the identification of achievement gaps and informing instructional strategies. Similarly, Kovaleski *et al.* [32], found that standardized testing supports schools in monitoring academic performance while highlighting areas that need targeted interventions for students with disabilities.

The participants explained:

“One of the most important pieces of data that we have to track is the result of state testing. This data will inform us whether or not our students have improved.” (P9)

“If the child is improving well based on his assessment results, the child can be re-evaluated. Then, he may be dismissed from the special education program.” (P5)

By identifying strengths and gaps in student understanding, these assessments guide instructional adjustments and targeted support. This promotes an inclusive environment where instruction is data-informed and success is clearly defined. Study participants acknowledged the impact of standardized testing on instruction and curriculum planning. They valued the structure it provides and its role in driving improvement. Motivated by these insights, Filipino special education teachers in the United States expressed a desire to advocate for similar practices back home. They believe that adopting standardized assessments in the Philippines could improve equity and educational outcomes for students with special needs.

4.1.2. Theme 2: systematic special education processes

A second major best practice identified by participants is the use of systematic processes that ensure consistency, accountability, and legal compliance in United States special education. Central to this system is the IEP, a legally mandated document that outlines the services, goals, and supports each student must receive. Schools follow structured procedures for developing, implementing, and monitoring IEPs, and these processes involve collaboration among general and special education teachers, families, specialists, and administrators. Participants emphasized that this systematic structure ensures that students’ needs are addressed through coordinated, legally grounded, and data-informed decision-making. This theme consists of three sub-themes: carrying out systematic IEP procedures, ensuring fidelity in special education processes, and engaging in collaborative planning.

Table 3. Systematic special education processes

Sub-theme	Description
Carrying out systematic IEP procedures	Ensuring that IEPs are developed and followed with precision to meet each student’s needs.
Ensuring fidelity in special education processes	Ensuring that special education services are delivered as designed and in accordance with established best practices and legal guidelines.
Engaging in collaborative planning	Fostering teamwork planning between educators, families, and other professionals to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

a. Sub-theme 1: carrying out systematic IEP procedures

The structured use of IEPs is foundational to United States special education, ensuring that instruction and services are individualized and aligned with each student's needs [33]. IEP meetings follow clear protocols: required members are identified based on expertise, schedules are coordinated to ensure participation, and decisions are grounded in data rather than personal preference. Regular evaluations and reevaluations further ensure that goals and services remain appropriate. Participants highlighted the clarity and consistency of this system:

"I should say that the special education processes are very systematic. Everything that is done is always in line with the law and other legal documents. This means that decisions are not made based on personal preference but follow a clear, defined process." (P3)

Research supports these observations. Powell *et al.* [34] found that systematic IEP procedures improve student outcomes by providing a structured framework for goal setting, progress monitoring, and instructional planning. Woods *et al.* [35] similarly emphasize that adherence to structured IEP processes ensures that interventions remain evidence-based and aligned with student needs. Filipino special education teachers valued how this system enhances accountability and instructional quality. They expressed interest in promoting similar frameworks in the Philippines to strengthen special education services and support inclusive practices.

b. Sub-theme 2: ensuring fidelity in special education processes

Fidelity of implementation, strict adherence to IDEA requirements and IEP provisions, is essential in United States special education [36]. Teachers are legally obligated to deliver the services outlined in each student's IEP, and failure to do so may result in legal consequences for both educators and administrators. Participants emphasized this responsibility:

"We have to make sure that we implement whatever is in the IEP of our students." (P10)
"It's also a legal document for the students, which means the teacher should implement it—or else they will face legal consequences if not implemented... especially the administration and the teachers." (P8)

Research reinforces the importance of fidelity. Woods *et al.* [37] note that consistent implementation of IEPs is critical for legal compliance and student success. Friend and Barron [38] add that fidelity fosters equity, accountability, and trust among educators, families, and students. Participants also highlighted the ethical dimension of fidelity, noting that values such as honesty, responsibility, and sincerity guide their work. Filipino teachers viewed the United States system's strong commitment to IEP implementation as a model that could strengthen accountability and protect the rights of students with disabilities in the Philippines.

c. Sub-theme 3: engaging in collaborative planning

Collaboration is a defining feature of United States special education. General and special education teachers, specialists, administrators, and families work together to design and implement IEPs that address students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs [39]. Participants described this collaborative culture:

"I also really appreciate how collaborative the process is. Special education teachers, therapists, and counselors all work together to monitor students' progress and make adjustments when needed." (P3)
"Both special education and general education teachers provide feedback on students' progress... Other professionals may raise concerns or offer insights, while administrators are present to provide support and address any questions." (P7)

Research supports the effectiveness of this model. Mortier and Aramburo [40] found that multidisciplinary collaboration enhances instructional quality and student outcomes. Nicolaysen [41] similarly notes that structured collaboration ensures that IEP goals are comprehensive, realistic, and aligned with student needs.

Each team member contributes unique expertise: general educators provide curriculum insights, special educators offer specialized strategies, therapists address developmental needs, and parents contribute essential context. Administrators coordinate these efforts and ensure resources are available. Filipino special education teachers valued this shared responsibility and recognized its impact on student success. They expressed interest in promoting similar collaborative structures in the Philippines to support more inclusive, student-centered learning environments.

4.1.3. Theme 3: inclusive instructional strategies and learning environments

Inclusive instructional strategies and varied learning environments are central to United States special education. Depending on the severity of a student's disability, support may be provided in self-contained classrooms, resource rooms, or general education settings. This tiered system ensures that students receive appropriate instruction while maintaining opportunities for meaningful participation alongside peers. This theme includes three sub-themes: facilitating specialized instruction in a self-contained classroom, delivering targeted instruction in a resource classroom, and integrating students in general education classrooms.

Table 4. Inclusive instructional strategies and learning environments

Sub-theme	Description
Facilitating specialized instruction in a self-contained classroom	A specialized classroom where students with more intensive needs receive individualized instruction and support separate from the general education setting.
Delivering targeted instruction in resource classroom	Provides targeted support for students with disabilities, allowing them to receive specialized instruction while spending part of their day in the general education classroom.
Integrating students in general education classroom	Integrates students with disabilities alongside their peers, offering support and accommodations to ensure all students can participate in the same curriculum.

a. Sub-theme 1: facilitating specialized instruction in a self-contained classroom

Self-contained classrooms are widely used in the United States to support students with significant disabilities, including emotional and behavioral disorders, intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, Down syndrome, and functional skill needs. These classrooms offer structured environments, modified curricula, and small student-to-teacher ratios that allow for intensive, individualized instruction. A participant explained:

“Self-contained classrooms are for the students who can’t fully be in the general education classroom due to the severity of their disabilities.” (P8)

Research supports this model. Spencer [42] notes that self-contained classrooms provide equitable learning opportunities through individualized instruction, consistent monitoring, and targeted behavioral support. Causton-Theoharis *et al.* [43] similarly emphasize that these settings are essential for students requiring interventions that cannot be effectively delivered in general education classrooms. Participants observed that self-contained environments allow teachers to address academic, behavioral, and emotional needs more effectively [44]. Overall, self-contained classrooms serve as critical spaces for students who need intensive support to succeed, ensuring access to instruction that is both appropriate and responsive.

b. Sub-theme 2: delivering targeted instruction in resource classroom

Resource classrooms provide targeted academic support for students with disabilities, typically in subjects such as math, language arts, English, and social studies [45]. Students often spend most of their day in general education settings and receive specialized instruction in the resource room for a portion of their schedule. Schools may use pull-out or push-in models depending on student needs and program structure. A participant shared:

“We also have resource classrooms, where students with disabilities receive individualized support and instruction.” (P3)

Research highlights the effectiveness of this approach. Starks and Reich [46] found that resource classrooms provide targeted interventions that address learning gaps while supporting success in general education. Mancera [47] adds that structured pull-out and push-in models improve engagement, skill mastery, and confidence when aligned with IEP goals. Participants emphasized that only students with IEPs receive resource services, ensuring that interventions are intentional and appropriate. This model helps address academic gaps and supports students' overall development, offering equitable opportunities for success.

c. Sub-theme 3: integrating students in general education classroom

The inclusion model places students with disabilities in general education classrooms with appropriate accommodations and support [48]. Special education teachers often “push in” to provide services within the general education setting, allowing students to participate in the same curriculum as their peers while receiving individualized assistance. One participant highlighted:

“One of the best practices that I really like here is the implementation of inclusion classes wherein you will never notice the discrimination of the students with disabilities.” (P2)

Research affirms the benefits of inclusion. Jardinez and Natividad [49] found that inclusive classrooms promote social integration, peer collaboration, and academic growth. Snow [50] similarly reports that push-in support enhances engagement, participation, and learning outcomes.

Participants valued how inclusion fosters belonging and equality. They also noted that general education teachers benefit from the expertise of special educators, creating a more supportive and collaborative learning environment. This model not only strengthens academic outcomes but also cultivates a school culture where all students learn together and support one another.

4.1.4. Theme 4: comprehensive students support services

A defining feature of United States special education is the provision of comprehensive support services that extend beyond classroom instruction. Students receive related services, such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, behavioral support, and counseling, based on their IEPs. These services address academic, social, emotional, and functional needs. Schools also provide transportation, free meals, and after school tutoring, ensuring that students with disabilities have equitable access to learning and holistic support. Transition goals within IEPs further prepare students for post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. This theme encompasses three sub-themes: offering special education-related services, accommodating students' needs, providing opportunities for extra help.

Table 5. Comprehensive students support services

Sub-theme	Description
Offering special education-related services.	Students with disabilities may also receive services from related professionals, including occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, behavioral therapy, counseling services, vision and hearing services, transportation services, assistive technology services, and transition services
Accommodating students' needs	Accommodations are crucial for helping students with disabilities access the curriculum and succeed by providing tailored support based on individual needs.
Providing opportunities for extra help	Providing additional support (e.g., tutoring, after-school programs) to ensure academic success for students with disabilities.

a. Sub-theme 1: offering special education-related services

A major strength of United States special education is its wide range of related services designed to support students' diverse needs. These include occupational and speech therapy, behavioral interventions, counseling, assistive technology, transportation, and transition services [51]. Participants emphasized the breadth of support:

“There's a lot of support, services, and accommodations available for our special education students, but one of the best practices I've seen is offering special education-related services, like speech therapy, occupational therapy, and counseling.” (P1)

“We know that school buses are available for students who need a ride. But, it's even more amazing that they also provide vehicles for students who need special assistance.” (P10)

Research affirms the importance of these services. Strnadová *et al.* [52] highlight those comprehensive related services support academic, behavioral, and social-emotional development. Pierce *et al.* [53] found that access to therapy, assistive technology, and transition services improves independence, engagement, and post-school outcomes. Filipino special education teachers viewed these services as essential to student growth and participation. They expressed interest in advocating for similar systems in the Philippines to enhance long-term outcomes for learners with disabilities.

b. Sub-theme 2: accommodating students' needs

Learning accommodations ensure that students with disabilities have equitable access to instruction and assessments. These adjustments, such as extended time, assistive technology, modified formats, and alternative assessments, allow students to demonstrate their knowledge without being limited by their disabilities [54]. Participants described how accommodations are planned and implemented:

“Students with special needs are provided with several accommodations and these are all discussed during the IEP meeting. So, all members of the team are aware of these accommodations.” (P10)

“I work closely with the school’s testing coordinator to ensure my students receive the accommodations outlined in their IEPs so that standardized test results reflect their abilities rather than their disabilities.” (P8)

Research supports these benefits. Lovett [55] found that individualized accommodations improve academic performance and reduce test anxiety. Rasooli *et al.* [56] report that accommodations enhance confidence, engagement, and equitable participation. Filipino teachers observed that accommodations not only improve academic outcomes but also support emotional well-being. They hope to promote similar practices in the Philippines to strengthen equity and student success.

c. Sub-theme 3: providing opportunities for extra help

Consistent academic support, through in-school tutorials, after-school programs, and Saturday classes, is another key practice in United States special education. These services reinforce learning, address skill gaps, and provide individualized instruction, often at no cost to families [57]. A participant shared:

“We also have after-school tutoring, where students are given help in those skills that they still struggle with or have not mastered, which comes from our analysis of the data.” (P4)

Research confirms the value of these supports. Vaghela and Parsana [58] found that structured extra-help programs improve mastery of difficult concepts and increase student confidence. Heilmann *et al.* [59] similarly report that individualized interventions outside regular class time enhance academic achievement and support inclusive outcomes. Filipino special education teachers emphasized the transformative impact of these services. They believe that implementing similar systems in the Philippines could significantly improve learning outcomes and promote greater inclusion for students with disabilities.

4.1.5. Theme 5: empowered teacher support and development

A key strength of United States special education is the comprehensive support system provided to teachers. This includes targeted professional development, instructional coaching, paraprofessional assistance, and co-teaching partnerships. These structures enhance teacher capacity, promote effective instructional practices, and foster inclusive learning environments. Participants emphasized that such support empowers teachers to meet diverse student needs and contributes to improved student outcomes. This theme encompasses four sub-themes: Enabling targeted professional development, coaching for teacher growth, utilizing paraprofessionals, and promoting co-teaching. Table 6 outlines the descriptions for each of these sub-themes.

Table 6. Empowered teacher support and development

Sub-theme	Description
Enabling targeted professional development	Providing professional development, training, and resources to help educators effectively support students with disabilities.
Coaching for teacher development	Offering coaching to teachers to improve academic outcomes and instructional practices.
Utilizing paraprofessionals	Utilizing paraprofessionals to assist in the classroom, providing targeted support to students with disabilities.
Promoting co-teaching	Ensuring that special education services are delivered as designed and in accordance with established best practices and legal guidelines.

a. Sub-theme 1: enabling targeted professional development

Ongoing, targeted professional development is a central feature of United States special education. These sessions provide teachers with updated knowledge, evidence-based strategies, and collaborative learning opportunities that strengthen instructional practice [60]. A participant shared:

“There’s a lot to learn in special education! I’m really grateful for the professional development opportunities that help me stay on top of what I need to know to fulfill my responsibilities as a special education teacher.” (P3)

Research supports these benefits. Gesel *et al.* [61] found that targeted professional development improves teacher confidence, instructional skills, and student outcomes, especially when aligned with classroom data. Ghamrawi *et al.* [62] similarly emphasize that ongoing, data-driven professional development fosters continuous improvement and collaboration. Filipino teachers valued these opportunities and expressed interest in promoting similar sustained, collaborative professional development in the Philippines to strengthen special education practice.

b. Sub-theme 2: coaching for teacher development

Instructional coaching is another highly effective support system observed by Filipino teachers in the United States. Academic coaches provide individualized guidance, help teachers navigate diverse student needs, and support the implementation of evidence-based strategies, support that is less common in the Philippines [63]. A participant explained:

“What’s even better is that our district offers targeted training specific to my needs in this role. On top of that, we receive coaching from experienced professionals.” (P6)

Research affirms the value of coaching. Glover *et al.* [64] found that instructional coaching enhances teacher efficacy and improves student outcomes. Smets and Struyven [65] add that coaching reduces teacher stress, strengthens collaboration, and supports differentiated instruction. Filipino teachers recognized coaching as a vital component of effective special education and believe similar systems could significantly improve instructional quality in the Philippines.

c. Sub-theme 3: utilizing paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals play a crucial role in United States special education by providing direct support to students and assisting teachers in inclusive classrooms [66]. They help implement IEPs, manage behavior, and facilitate instruction, allowing teachers to focus on delivering high-quality lessons. Participants described their contributions:

“In our classroom, we work with paraprofessionals... They assist the teacher in delivering the lesson and in facilitating the class activities. They also help manage classroom behavior.” (P1)
“They help with tasks like taking kids to the restroom and managing behavior, allowing teachers to focus on instruction.” (P10)

Research supports these observations. Babin [67] notes that paraprofessionals enhance individualized support and improve student engagement. Tagavi *et al.* [68] found that paraprofessional involvement strengthens inclusive practices and promotes collaboration among educators. Filipino teachers emphasized that paraprofessionals significantly improve classroom functioning and student support. They advocate for establishing similar roles in the Philippines to enhance inclusive education.

d. Sub-theme 4: promoting co-teaching

Co-teaching, where general and special education teachers jointly plan and deliver instruction, is a widely recognized best practice in United States special education [69]. This model ensures that students with disabilities receive support within the general education classroom while benefiting from two teachers’ expertise. A participant noted:

“One of the best practices is co-teaching between the inclusion teacher and the general education teacher. They take turns delivering lessons and providing assistance.” (P6)

Research highlights the benefits of co-teaching. Johnson [70] found that it fosters inclusive learning and improves student engagement. Chenier [71] reports that co-teaching enhances collaboration, reduces teacher workload, and leads to better academic and social outcomes for students with disabilities. Filipino teachers viewed co-teaching as a valuable contrast to the single-teacher model common in the Philippines. They believe adopting this approach could strengthen inclusion and improve support for students with special needs.

5. CONCLUSION

This study shows how Filipino special education teachers in the United States identify key best practices that contribute to an effective and inclusive system. These practices, data-driven instruction, systematic processes, inclusive learning environments, comprehensive support services, and empowered teacher development, ensure individualized, equitable, and legally protected opportunities for students with disabilities. Their experiences highlight the importance of structured systems, institutional support, collaboration, and continuous professional learning. These insights offer valuable guidance for strengthening special education in the Philippines. Improving policy implementation, expanding inclusive models such as co-teaching and resource classrooms, increasing access to related services, and investing in sustained professional development can enhance instructional quality and equity. Integrating data-driven decision-making and ensuring fidelity to individualized plans may further improve outcomes for learners with disabilities.

This study is limited to Filipino teachers working in the United States, and their experiences may not represent all contexts. Future research may include student perspectives, examine scalability across

diverse Philippine settings, and explore how these practices can be adapted in resource-constrained environments. Ultimately, Filipino teachers serve as both beneficiaries and potential change agents. Their cross-cultural experiences provide a practical roadmap for building a more inclusive, student-centered, and equitable special education system in the Philippines.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

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	R : Resources	Su : Supervision
So : Software	D : Data Curation	P : Project administration
Va : Validation	O : Writing - Original Draft	Fu : Funding acquisition
Fo : Formal analysis	E : Writing - Review & Editing	

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

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

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [NP], upon reasonable request.

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