

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Qualitative exploration in mainstreaming classroom inclusivity through the lenses of anti-bias education (ABE)

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education ensures that every learner has access to a supportive and responsive learning environment, where their unique needs are recognized and addressed. By embracing diversity, inclusive education encourages a sense of belonging, self-worth, and social cohesion among the stakeholders. However, Philippine basic education is lagging when it comes to implementing inclusive education. Hence, this paper explored the context of mainstreaming classroom inclusivity through the lenses of Anti-bias Education (ABE). Elementary teachers (n=16) were purposively sampled to be interviewed about their experiences in mainstreaming inclusive classrooms. Narratives were extracted from transcripts and labeled as reflexive themes. Findings indicated that a strong professional identity rooted in care, empathy, and respect for diversity enables teachers to advocate for inclusive practices. Teachers with a well-defined sense of identity are more likely to challenge biases, encourage respect for differences, and create positive learning experiences for students with special needs. Instructional strategies used by teachers in inclusive settings are shaped by their identity and perceptions of what works best for students. These strategies include differentiated instruction, individualized support, and the use of adaptive teaching methods to meet different learning needs, including personalized learning plans, flexible grouping, and project-based learning to ensure all students can engage meaningfully with the learning content. Teachers who perceive inclusive education positively tend to be more open to embracing new teaching strategies, seek additional resources, and actively engage with students with special needs. However, challenges such as inadequate training, limited resources, and large class sizes can lead to feelings of frustration among teachers, especially if they feel unsupported. Conversely, when teachers perceive institutional support, such as ongoing professional development and encouragement from school leadership, they are more likely to adopt inclusive practices and feel empowered to support their students effectively. Nurturing a teacher's identity, equipping them with effective strategies, providing strong support, and shaping their perceptions of inclusion are profound for policymakers and school administrators. From the core of ABE, these elements contribute to a more inclusive, equitable, and supportive educational environment for students with special needs.

Keywords: anti-bias education; inclusive education; institutional support; student-centered learning

1. Introduction

Inclusive education embodies a strategy that points out the importance of establishing a learning environment that is both supportive and accessible to every student, no matter of their physical, mental, or

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social capabilities, as well as any special learning needs they may have^[1]. Consistent with the globally acknowledged Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the objective of inclusive education is to welcome students with special needs into the general education framework, ensuring they receive equal exposure to and quality of learning opportunities alongside their peers^[2]. This hopes to dismantle the physical, social, and attitudinal barriers that hinder their complete participation^[3,4].

Inclusive education in the Philippines is embedded at the birth of its 1987 constitution as it is both an international duty and a constitutional responsibility. A recent analysis conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund^[5] estimates that approximately 1.6 million children in the Philippines are living with disabilities^[6]. On March 11, 2022, the Republic Act 11650 was officially approved and enacted as part of the government's initiatives for inclusive education. This legislation mandates that all public educational institutions across the country must identify students with special needs and ensure that these students receive free, basic, and quality education^[7]. The regulation stipulates that every city and municipality must establish a minimum of one Inclusive Learning Resource Center (ILRC) designed to offer instructional and educational assistance through materials that are appropriate, available, and sensitive to gender considerations^[8]. In the 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices in the Philippines, the enforcement of the law was inadequate, and numerous obstacles persist, such as architectural barriers that hinder attendance for individuals with disabilities. Stakeholders and advocates have expressed concerns regarding the delay in the issuance of the law's Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR), which has persisted for over a year following its passage^[9].

Inclusive education in the Philippines is in its early years, following the enactment of Republic Act 11650 or known as "Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities in Support of Inclusive Education Act." Teachers specializing in Special Education encounter significant obstacles when instructing students with hearing impairments. These challenges are particularly evident in the areas of sign language utilization and the implementation of effective communication strategies, highlighting the necessity for targeted training and the incorporation of assistive technology^[10]. Likewise, research indicates that special education teachers in the Philippines encounter limitations such as inadequate preparedness, limited expertise, and the influence of social contexts on their teaching practices, as detailed in the study on inclusive education experiences^[11]. A study conducted by Abina et al.^[12] in Davao City identified several challenges faced by special education teachers, including the presence of mixed disabilities within a single classroom, issues with comprehension, low levels of parental educational attainment, behaviors that induce tantrums, insufficient funding, and a lack of government support.

This paper recognized the pressing need to integrate discussions about the state of inclusive education in the Philippines. Miña^[13] suggested that future investigations should focus on identifying the most effective strategies for special education, such as innovative teaching techniques, assessing the impact of inclusive practices, and evaluating the success of support systems. Additionally, this study examined the context of inclusive education through the principles of Anti-bias Education (ABE). It highlighted the experiences of basic education teachers and analyzed their influence on social change and instructional practices.

In early childhood, children are constantly learning about themselves, others, and society, striving to make meaningful connections^[14]. Given that children arrive in classrooms with these emerging theories, teachers have a responsibility to support their understanding and facilitate conversations about diversity. Research in early childhood education suggests that the early years are ideal for teaching children about cultural differences, encouraging respect for diversity, and promoting tolerance for others^[15]. ABE ensures the establishment of a community that acknowledges and supports the dimensions of human differences like

race, language, culture and ethnicity, skills, learning styles, family dynamics, religion, sexual orientation, gender, age, and socioeconomic status^[16,17]. For example, Bennett^[18] believed that while racism and sexism are fundamentally “un-American,” the apprehension many teachers exhibit towards addressing values or altering perceptions related to discrimination and stereotypes—such as the fight for minority rights, the right to dissent, and the boundaries of free speech—serves as a tacit manifestation of prejudice and discrimination. This type of bias is also evident in inclusive education, where educators’ reluctance to address sensitive topics like discrimination, stereotypes, and systemic inequalities can unintentionally perpetuate exclusion. Sharek^[19] observed that some teachers express dissatisfaction with the additional time and effort required to support children with special needs. Most concerning were instances where educators displayed apathy toward students with disabilities, citing the increased workload of lesson planning and accommodations as barriers to fostering an inclusive classroom environment.

The ABE approach offers a framework for addressing social justice and equity in classrooms by evaluating and improving current practices. This involves understanding the supports and barriers teachers face and establishing a baseline for antibias efforts. Implementing ABE goals—empowering students to engage with identity, diversity, justice, and activism—requires teachers to make a personal commitment to anti-bias education. Though initially challenging, becoming an anti-bias teacher centers on valuing diverse identities and encouraging a curriculum that respects and includes all students.

2. Literature review

Inclusive Education is an educational approach that integrates students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms alongside their typically developing peers, ensuring equal access to education while providing necessary accommodations for students with disabilities^[20,21]. This approach has been widely supported since the adoption of the Salamanca Statement in 1994, which emphasized the importance of inclusive systems and called for global reforms to integrate students with special needs into regular educational settings^[22]. In response, numerous countries have implemented policies and legislation to uphold inclusive education, leading to significant research in this field, especially in Western nations^[23,24].

Over the past decade, a substantial body of research has supported inclusive education as the best practice for students with disabilities, demonstrating its positive impact on their academic performance and achievement). Students in inclusive settings often experience enhanced opportunities for higher education, improvements in vocational skills, and better overall developmental outcomes. Furthermore, research highlights that inclusive education contributes to the reduction of maladaptive behaviors with supportive and interactive learning environment for students with disabilities^[25,26,24,27,28,21,29].

Creating inclusive educational strategies requires addressing the diverse needs of children with conditions such as autism, intellectual disabilities, sensory impairments, or giftedness^[30]. Notably, inclusive classrooms can reduce the need for separate facilities, resulting in potential cost savings for schools^[31]. Simple architectural modifications can enhance accessibility, which develop effective integration of learning process for students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. This approach also helps these students develop as valued and equal members of their communities^[32,33]. However, challenges arise due to insufficient infrastructure and limited resources, including a shortage of qualified educators^[33]. Despite its advantages, implementing inclusive education in public schools is fraught with difficulties. Schools face resistance from local communities, policymakers, and stakeholders within their organizational environment^[34]. Concerns include the perceived financial strain of supporting inclusive practices and fears of compromised academic outcomes for students in general education. Teacher stress and the lack of professional development opportunities further impede progress^[35]. Some argue that including special needs

students could disrupt the regular curriculum, but such claims lack substantial evidence to justify exclusion. Schools not adopting inclusive practices often critique institutions that deviate from these principles, highlighting the ongoing debate surrounding this educational approach. Teachers may struggle with adapting instructional content, reorganizing classroom spaces, or implementing inclusive programs designed to students with special needs^[36,37].

In the context of the Philippines, it became apparent that factors such as class sizes, insufficient cooperation, and inadequate pre-service training adversely influenced outcomes of inclusive education^[38-40]. Gonzaga et al.^[41] analyzed the implementation of inclusive education in Cebu Province indicating teachers felt prepared for inclusive education, but there was a significant need for further training, particularly in collaboration skills. Likewise, teachers generally viewed inclusion positively, indicating support for the integration of deaf and hard of hearing students into mainstream classrooms. However, both papers identified gaps in skills and training, particularly related to inclusive practices in Philippine setting. Consequently, the scarcity of information concerning the practice of inclusion within the Philippine education system presented challenges in clearly defining the appropriate level of engagement for members and stakeholders of the school community^[42].

Given the need for extensive research regrading inclusive education in the country, this paper was positioned to discuss about the applications of ABE in the Philippine inclusive education framework. Studies argued that the fundamental principles of inclusive education emphasized the entitlement of all children to engage in learning within mainstream classrooms, free from discrimination or segregation, irrespective of their different learning needs and characteristics^[38,43,42], which makes it ideal to look into the concept of inclusive education through the lenses of ABE.

ABE is characterized as “an approach to education that explicitly works to end all forms of bias and discrimination”^[44]. The paradigm has four main goals: Identity (helping children develop positive personal identities); Diversity (promoting empathy and comfort with human differences), Justice (teaching to recognize bias and understand its harmful impact); and Activism (empowering to confidently challenge prejudice and discrimination)^[14]. ABE is widely applied in different socially critical issues like racism, cultural segregation, gender, and learning^[45,17,46].

ABE highlighted educational inequities reflecting how structural factors and classroom dynamics contribute to disparities in educational outcomes, particularly for students from minoritized groups, especially those in color^[45,47]. For example, Carter^[48] emphasized the unequal treatment students experience within mainstream schooling, pointing out that curricular content often privileges “Euro-American historical and cultural perspectives,” while framing other cultures as “other”. The structural bias that exists in educational materials is evident in the predominance of white authors and characters in textbooks. Reed Marshall and Rodick^[49] believed that, despite advancements in removing overtly racist stereotypes, textbooks continue to inadequately represent individuals of color. Likewise, Gay^[50] argued that even when people of color are depicted, the portrayal tends to rely on stereotypes or offers a limited view of their cultures, rather than providing a rich and diverse representation. Woo^[47] pointed out that textbooks tend to focus on “safe” issues, avoiding the discussion of broader structural realities, which undermines children’s ability to understand the complex social dynamics that affect different groups.

Further, covert forms of racism in education sheds light on how certain educators, despite the reduction of overtly racist attitudes, may still unknowingly perpetuate harmful messages to students of color^[51,47]. Lewis and Diamond^[52] discussed how these subtle forms of racism manifest in practices like “color-blind racism” or “racial apathy,” which can diminish the significance of race in understanding students’

experiences while subtly perpetuating inequality. McKenzie and Scheurich^[53] explored this phenomenon in their work on equity traps, where they define these as “conscious and unconscious thinking patterns and behaviors that trap teachers, administrators, and others, preventing them from creating schools that are equitable, particularly for students of color.” Their work emphasized how some educators may adopt a “deficit view,” in which they attribute the lack of academic success of students of color to perceived “inherent or endogenous student deficits,” such as “cultural inadequacies, lack of motivation, poor behavior, or failed families and communities.” Teachers who hold a deficit view may inadvertently or consciously limit students’ opportunities for success by misinterpreting their challenges as personal failings rather than acknowledging the broader structural and systemic inequities at play. This perspective reinforced the importance of equity-focused professional development and self-reflection among teachers. Teachers need to be made aware of their potential biases and the impact these biases can have on their expectations and interactions with students of color^[54].

A primary role of teachers is to enable students across various levels, especially within a diverse and changing societal context^[54]. Teachers are progressively facing an eclectic population of students characterized by different races, ethnicities, cultures, and special needs within their classrooms^[55-57]. The demographic shift in early childhood classrooms presented teachers with a challenge to develop a more responsive approach while encouraging institutions to establish inclusive education practices^[58]. In principle, ABE aims to empower individuals to challenge societal norms and biases actively, encouraging an environment where students can engage with complex social realities and work toward equity^[59]. This approach provided a foundation for teachers to not only reflect on their own biases but also to cultivate environments where students are encouraged to recognize and resist discrimination.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

This paper explored the mainstream classroom inclusivity from the perspective of ABE. An exploratory study, often employed when investigating phenomena that are not yet fully understood, serves as a crucial tool for uncovering insights and framing a phenomenon^[60,61]. This design is particularly effective when researchers aim to explore emerging issues, like the emergence of inclusive classrooms for learners with special needs, which requires a flexible and open-ended approach to gather preliminary data and allow for an unbiased understanding of participants’ experiences^[62]. Exploratory research is often employed in the social sciences to systematically and deliberately identify patterns and essential components that help in understanding complex social or psychological phenomena^[63,64]. This approach is particularly beneficial when there is limited existing knowledge on the topic, as it allows researchers to adjust to new data and adapt their methods as they gain understanding about the subject matter^[65]. Despite criticisms regarding the scientific rigor of exploratory studies, their role in laying the groundwork for investigations remains undeniably valuable, as they provide a preliminary framework that can inform the direction of future research^[66]. In essence, exploratory research addresses under-researched areas (like inclusivity in Philippine basic education) which generates knowledge and guide subsequent studies, particularly when the phenomena under investigation are emergent and poorly understood. This paper answered one critical question: how do teachers mainstream inclusivity in basic education classrooms?

3.2. Participants and sampling

Exploratory studies generally concentrate on gathering detailed qualitative data and seek to refine broad concepts into specific themes, often using small sample sizes, with an emphasis on the depth and richness of the data rather than the number of participants^[67,65]. This approach is particularly suited to single case studies

or small-scale studies, where the emphasis is on detailed insights rather than generalizability^[68]. As a rule, Subedi^[69] suggested that qualitative designs, particularly phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and case studies, typically involve sample sizes ranging from one to 20 participants, as these methods focus on in-depth exploration of individual experiences or specific cases. Hence, selecting 16 basic education teachers was reasonable, given the nature of this study and the typical sample sizes used in qualitative research designs. They were purposively sampled to participate in one-on-one interview regarding their experiences in mainstreaming inclusivity in basic education. The flexibility of purposive sampling allows researchers to target specific subgroups or individuals whose characteristics align with the research objectives, ensuring that the collected data is directly relevant to the research questions^[70-73]. Filipino teachers from southern Philippines were purposively sampled based on three characteristics: an elementary teacher (>10 years in service), relevant training (attended at least 10 trainings), and handles learners with special needs. These were the main criteria imposed in selecting the participants to be interviewed.

3.3. Research instrument

In exploring the experiences of basic education teachers, a semi-structured interview guide was developed. This process began with a clear understanding of the study’s goals and relevant contextual knowledge, which guides the formulation of initial questions^[74]. These questions are crafted to encourage open, narrative responses from participants, providing a framework for collecting detailed and meaningful data^[75,76]. Using a semi-structured format is particularly advantageous, as it enables interviewers to maintain a focused discussion while allowing them to adapt based on participants’ responses, prompting follow-up questions to explore the emerging themes^[77,78]. To ensure the interview guide’s effectiveness, preliminary questions often undergo a pilot testing phase, during which clarity, relevance, and usability are assessed and refined based on feedback from participants and experts^[79,80]. Expert review is integral to the process, providing direction on its alignment with research objectives and suggesting adjustments to enhance clarity and coherence^[74]. With expert feedback and piloting questions, researchers can create a tool that is both aligned with study objectives and adaptable to real-time interactions. The iterative process of refining the guide enables researchers to design a tool that supports a structured yet dynamic data collection process, ensuring that interviews yield a comprehensive understanding of participants’ perspectives^[81,82]. **Table 1** presents the final guide for interviews.

Table 1. Interview guide questions.

Objectives	Questions
To identify the current practices and approaches used by basic education professionals in implementing inclusive education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What specific strategies do you employ to create an inclusive classroom environment? b. Can you describe any teaching methods or practices that you find effective in supporting diverse learners? c. How do you collaborate with other educators or specialists to enhance inclusive education in your classroom? d. What resources or tools do you utilize to facilitate inclusive education practices? e. How do you assess the effectiveness of your inclusive teaching practices in meeting the needs of all students?
To explore the challenges faced by educators in mainstreaming inclusive education in basic education settings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What are the primary challenges you encounter when trying to implement inclusive education in your classroom? b. How do factors such as class size or available resources impact your ability to provide inclusive education? c. In your experience, what institutional or policy barriers hinder the effective mainstreaming of inclusive education? d. How do you address any resistance or misconceptions from parents, colleagues, or administration regarding inclusive education? e. What support or professional development opportunities do you feel are necessary to overcome these challenges and enhance inclusive practices?

3.4. Data gathering procedure

Narratives were gathered through one-on-one interviews with the participants. The process typically begins with defining clear research objectives and selecting participants who embody the characteristics necessary to explore the study's themes^[83,84]. The conversational tone of interviews allows participants to express themselves naturally, as informal exchanges are less likely to inhibit responses and can lead to detailed, meaningful narratives^[85,86]. Although the interview is conversational, using a structured guide (as shown in **Table 1**) helps the interviewer remain aligned with the study's goals while adapting to the participant's responses^[87]. The interview guide should include thematic questions that address the study's primary topics, providing a basis for consistency while enabling the interviewer to ask follow-up questions to deepen understanding and clarify participant responses^[88,79]. By establishing a transparent and trustworthy environment, the researcher sets the stage for open dialogue; this involves informing participants about the study's purpose, ethical considerations, confidentiality measures, and data use to help them feel comfortable and willing to share^[71,89]. To maintain data quality, Shensul et al.^[90] emphasize three principles: keeping the interviewee's narrative flow uninterrupted, building rapport, and minimizing interviewer bias. Throughout the interview, active listening is essential to establish rapport and ensure participants feel their experiences are respected and valued^[91]. Using reflective and probing questions, it encourages participants to elaborate on complex ideas and self-reflect, enriching the narrative data^[92].

3.5. Data analysis

The analysis of narrative data in this study was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis, an approach that goes beyond identifying surface-level patterns to reveal deeper shared meanings centered on primary concepts^[93]. This method is dynamic and flexible, allowing codes to evolve as the researcher gains a richer understanding of the data, and it emphasizes the subjective nature of coding, acknowledging the researcher's role in shaping the interpretation^[94]. Reflexivity is a cornerstone of this approach, encouraging researchers to consider how their values and experiences may impact the coding and interpretation of data, which strengthens rather than diminishes the study's rigor^[95,96]. An inductive, bottom-up approach was applied, meaning themes and codes were derived directly from the data rather than fitting into pre-existing frameworks, allowing the participants' voices to guide the analysis and ensuring reflective findings^[97]. This approach minimizes researcher bias and focuses on letting the data speak for itself, which is essential for accurately capturing participants' experiences and perspectives. As shown in **Figure 1**, The analysis followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke^[98]: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This structured yet flexible process allowed the researcher to move iteratively from basic descriptive coding to deeper interpretative coding, progressively building a nuanced understanding of the data^[99,100]. Each phase facilitated an in-depth engagement with the data, enabling themes to emerge naturally from repeated interaction and refinement. This reflexive, inductive approach is particularly valuable in exploratory research, where the goal is to uncover participants' lived experiences in a reflective and context-sensitive manner^[101,102]. Through this method, the analysis remained grounded in participants' narratives, ensuring a valid and comprehensive representation of the phenomenon being investigated^[103].

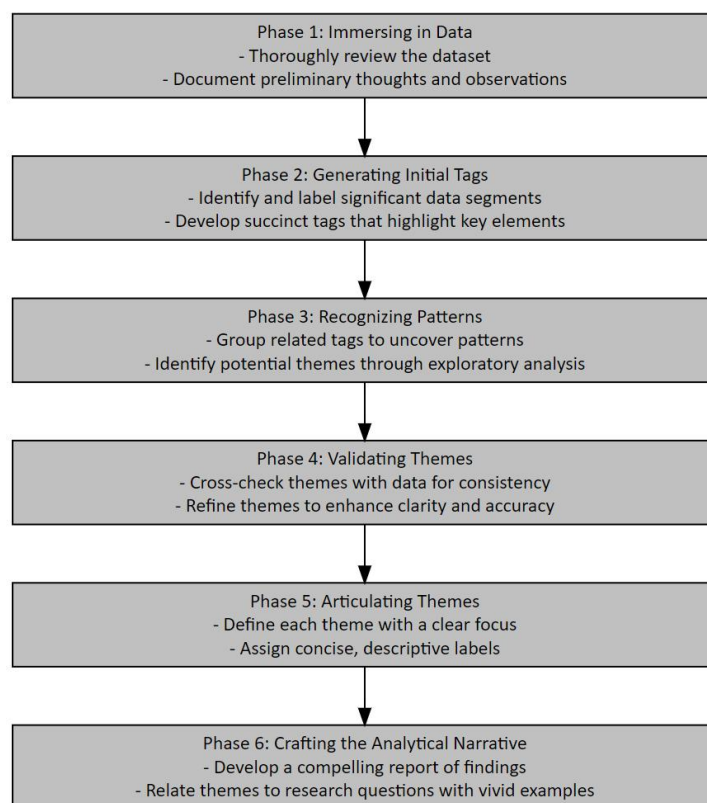


Figure 1. Workflow of data analysis.

4. Results

Teachers’ practices in implementing inclusive education revealed student-centered instruction as a prominent approach, where teachers use differentiated activities, assistive technology, and visual aids to meet diverse learning styles. Teachers emphasized inclusivity, ensuring all students feel welcomed and respected, while some educators actively address resistance by highlighting the benefits of an inclusive environment. Another key approach is adaptive instruction, with educators closely monitoring progress and adjusting teaching based on student feedback. Lastly, collaboration with special education staff and counselors emerged as essential, enabling tailored strategies for individual students. Regarding challenges, teachers identified class size as a barrier, as larger classes make individualized attention difficult. Inadequate training was also noted, with teachers expressing a need for further resources and professional development to effectively implement inclusive education. The lack of support—from both parents and institutions—was a recurring issue, highlighting the need for better cooperation, funding, and access to inclusive tools.

Objective 1: To identify the current practices and approaches used by basic education professionals in implementing inclusive education.

Teachers implemented inclusive education through student-centered instruction, employing differentiated activities, assistive technology, and visual aids to support diverse learning needs. They prioritized inclusivity by encouraging respectful environments where all students felt valued, even addressing resistance by promoting inclusive attitudes and sharing success stories. Adaptive instruction was another key approach, as teachers continually assessed student progress and adjusted their methods to enhance understanding and engagement. Finally, teachers emphasized collaboration, regularly consulting with special education staff and counselors to develop critically designed strategies that accommodated individual learning needs.

Theme 1: Student-centered Instruction

Teachers applied student-centered instruction by adapting various teaching methods to address different learning styles, ensuring that all students had opportunities to engage and succeed. They incorporated assistive technology, visual aids, and seating arrangements to create an inclusive environment that accommodated diverse needs.

“I use a variety of teaching methods to cater to different learning styles, and I make time for group work so students can learn from one another.”

“I use assistive technology, visual aids and seating arrangements to accommodate diverse learning styles.”

Teachers emphasized the importance of differentiated activities, designing lessons with visuals, hands-on activities, and real-life examples to support students’ unique ways of learning. They also allowed students to ask questions and express their needs, reflecting a responsive and flexible learning environment. Teachers also used educational games and digital tools like tablets to engage learners and adjusted assessments for those requiring extra support.

“I could say that the most effective way is to give them differentiated activities depending on their diversity.”

“I make sure my lessons include these different methods such as the visuals, hands-on activities, and real-life examples to help different kinds of learners. As we all know some students may learn better through listening, others through seeing. I also give students the chance to ask questions and express their needs.”

“Just like what I’m doing, I always use visual aids, educational games, and digital tools like tablets or computers when available. I also adjust lessons and assessments for students who require extra time or an alternative method to grasp the material.”

For them, implementing differentiation and scaffolding maximized learning opportunities, often innovating materials and resources to better serve their students. Through differentiation, they designed lessons to individual learning styles, creating multiple pathways for understanding and engagement. Scaffolding further supported students by breaking down complex tasks into manageable steps, enabling gradual mastery of skills. Teachers often innovated materials and resources to enhance this process, creatively adapting or repurposing available tools and materials to better serve their students.

“I utilize differentiation which is scaffolding for all learners.”

“Any available resource will do. But most of the time they innovated materials and resources.”

Theme 2: Inclusivity

For most teachers, inclusivity emphasized active environment where all students felt valued and respected. They designed respectful activities and applied a personal learning approach to ensure that each student’s needs were recognized and accommodated. Teachers prioritized creating a welcoming atmosphere by respecting students’ differences and encouraging mutual respect among peers.

“I make sure that my activities are respectful and use a personal learning approach, so students are always taken into account.”

“I make sure all students feel welcome by respecting their differences and encouraging them to respect each other.”

When they encountered resistance to inclusive education, teachers addressed it by explaining the positive outcomes of inclusivity and sharing stories of success, which helped break down stereotypes and demonstrate the benefits of an inclusive classroom. In such cases, they also focused on educating others about the importance of inclusivity, advocating for an inclusive attitude within the school community.

“When there is resistance to inclusive education, I open the door by explaining outcomes and comparing stories of success. It breaks down stereotypes and demonstrates why being inclusive serves us all.”

“In cases where resistance is present, I stress on educating others about benefits of inclusion and adopting an inclusive attitude.”

Theme 3: Adaptive Instruction

Adaptive instruction highlighted how teachers continuously adjusted their teaching methods to meet students' needs. Teachers closely monitored student progress by observing participation, evaluating their performance through tests and activities, and asking for student feedback. When they noticed students were not understanding or engaging fully, they adapted their instruction accordingly. Teachers used formal and informal assessments, including games, to gauge student progress and understanding. This practice of regular assessment and feedback-driven refinement allowed teachers to make their instruction more inclusive and responsive to individual learning needs.

“I check how well I teach by watching how students take part in lessons, looking at their progress through tests and activities, and asking for their opinions. I change my teaching if I notice some students are not understanding or joining in as much as others.”

“So, I monitor student progress and provide feedback using the information students have given me, which helps refine my practice.”

“My inclusive teaching is, I make it a point to regularly assess my students' progress through a mix of formal and informal evaluations, like games.”

Theme 4: Collaboration

Teachers emphasized the importance of collaborating with various professionals to improve instructional practices and address the diverse needs of students. They reported being familiar with working alongside special education staff, counselors, and other teachers to differentiate lessons and develop effective strategies for a wide range of learners. Teachers frequently consulted with special education staff and counselors to ensure that strategies were tailored to meet the unique needs of individual students.

“Familiar working with special education staff, counselors and other teachers to differentiate lessons for a variety of learners.”

“I frequently consult with the special education teachers and counselors to see what works for the individual students in devising strategies.”

In addition, they actively engaged in LAC sessions and in-service training to enhance their skills and stay updated on best practices. Teachers also sought technical assistance when needed to redefine their approaches and support all students effectively.

“By attending LAC Session, in-service training and by asking for some technical assistance.”

Objective 2: To explore the challenges faced by educators in mainstreaming inclusive education in basic education settings.

Findings revealed several key challenges faced by teachers in mainstreaming inclusive education in basic education settings. One significant obstacle was class size, where larger classes and fewer resources limited the ability to provide personalized attention to students. Another challenge identified was inadequate training, with teachers pointing out institutional barriers such as insufficient professional development and variability in policies that hindered the effective implementation of inclusive practices. Teachers highlighted the lack of support, citing challenges like language barriers, the lack of parental cooperation, and insufficient resources to maintain effective inclusive education.

Theme 1: Class Size

Teachers highlighted class size as one of challenges they faced in providing personalized instruction in inclusive classrooms. Teachers reported that bigger classes and fewer resources resulted in less personalization, making it difficult to address the needs of each student. They noted that with an increased number of students and limited tutors, it became problematic to devote the necessary individual attention to students, which hindered their ability to effectively support all learners.

“Bigger classes and fewer resources mean less personalization.”

“Having an inclusive learning, it can be problematic for teachers to devote enough individual attention because of more students and fewer tutors.”

Theme 2: Inadequate Training

Teachers revealed inadequate training as significant challenge they faced in effectively implementing inclusive education. Teachers identified institutional barriers, such as insufficient training and variability in policies, which weakened the cost-effective mainstreaming of inclusive practices. They emphasized that the lack of adequate training greatly impacted the teaching-learning process, particularly when teachers were not innovative in their approaches. Teachers expressed the need for teacher training programs focused on inclusive education, as well as more tools and resources to enhance their teaching.

“Institutional barriers include inadequate training and variability in policies that weaken overall cost-effective mainstreaming of inclusive education.”

“It greatly impacts the teaching-learning process if you are not an innovative educator.”

Teachers strongly emphasized the critical role of continuous training and ongoing support from schools or the DepEd to improve their ability to teach all learners effectively. They believed that teacher training programs specifically designed for inclusive education were essential to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge. Teachers also pointed out the need for more tools and resources to address the diverse needs of students. They expressed that continuous professional development and access to updated resources and training would enable them to refine their teaching strategies, better support inclusive practices, which enhances the learning experiences for all students.

“I believe teacher training programs are needed for inclusive education. We also require more tools and resources. It would also help if the school or DepEd

provided continuous training and resources for us to be better teachers in teaching all learners effectively.”

Theme 3: Support

In the context of inclusive education, support can be social support or institutional support. For example, one significant barrier was the language barrier and the lack of parental cooperation and support, which made it difficult for teachers to foster an inclusive learning environment. Social support primarily refers to the involvement of parents, peers, and the community in helping teachers and students navigate the challenges of inclusive education. A significant barrier identified by teachers was the language barrier, which hindered communication and understanding, particularly when students spoke different languages or dialects. This language challenge was compounded by the lack of parental cooperation and support. Teachers expressed that when parents were not actively involved or supportive, it became more difficult to create an inclusive environment where all students felt valued and understood.

“For me it is the language barrier, the lack of parent’s cooperation and support.”

Teachers noted that for inclusive education to be successful, there needed to be increased learning opportunities focused on inclusive practices and greater access to support tools that could help them meet the diverse needs of their students. These tools might include assistive technologies, teaching materials, and professional development programs. Teachers emphasized that such support was crucial for the advancement and maintenance of inclusive education, as it allowed them to continually improve their practices and better address the challenges posed by a diverse student population.

“Time and resources allocated to focusing on diversity in a high performing environment tend to be low.”

They also highlighted that time and resources allocated to addressing diversity were often low, especially in high-performing environments where the focus was typically on academic outcomes rather than inclusivity. Furthermore, teachers identified institutional barriers, such as the lack of funding for specialized resources and the insufficient number of teachers trained in inclusion techniques, which further compounded the difficulties they faced in effectively implementing inclusive practices.

“Increased learning focused on inclusive practices and access to support tools are necessary for advancement maintenance.”

“The institutional barriers managing lack of funding for specialized resources and few teachers trained in inclusion techniques.”

5. Discussion

ABE is an approach to early education that “sets forth values-based principles and methodology in support of respecting and embracing differences and acting against bias and unfairness”^[14]. Anti-bias education includes encouraging a community that embraces every dimension of human diversity, embracing culture, ethnic background, language ability, learning preferences, race, family composition, religion, gender, sexuality, age, and socioeconomic status^[16,17]. The ABE approach to teaching presents a valuable opportunity to evaluate and address the challenges associated with social justice and equity within the classroom environment^[59].

Filipino teachers showed positive perceptions about mainstreaming classroom inclusivity, which reflected the contexts of ABE in classroom management. For example, they “make sure all students feel

welcome by respecting their differences and encouraging them to respect each other.” According to Vittrup^[15], it is observed that prior to reaching school age, children start to develop concepts related to race and its characteristics, where studies have identified manifestations of bias in children as early as ages three to five. Young children engage in a process of understanding their environment by formulating theories based on their observations and experiences^[44]. Consequently, when children formulate these theories and introduce them into the classroom, it becomes the responsibility of teachers to assist children in their pursuit of awareness and to facilitate significant discussions regarding social differences^[14]. For teachers, the formative years represent a critical opportunity for effectively educating children regarding the essence of cultural differences, promoting respect for diversity, and cultivating tolerance towards others.

One critical aspect of ABE is teachers’ willingness to take part in inclusive education. Plascencia-Carrizosa^[59] argued that teachers should possess the agency to address and challenge injustices present in the curriculum, free from concerns regarding possible consequences from their administrative superiors. Teachers should possess a strong grounding towards classroom inclusivity that when a teacher adopts an identity characterized by care and inclusivity, it can create opportunities for positive and fair interactions with other people^[104]. Specifically, the teacher’s inclusive attitude and approach can help bridge potential gaps in understanding, particularly when there are cultural or linguistic differences between the school and the families^[105]. This paper contributed to the understanding that ABE should reflect the strong presence of personal identity among teachers to make classroom inclusivity possible. Identity in a sense that teachers hold a firm standing about what they fight for—inclusivity—to make the paradigm effective. For example, “When there is resistance to inclusive education, I open the door by explaining outcomes and comparing stories of success. It breaks down stereotypes and demonstrates why being inclusive serves us all.” From this account, the strong presence of identity in ABE contributes to a teacher’s ability to uphold their beliefs and fight for an inclusive educational paradigm. In essence, teachers must hold a firm stance on inclusivity, making it a core aspect of their professional identity. An individual whose identity is strongly linked to their occupation, roles, and values is likely to cultivate a dedication to perform competently and authentically within their profession^[106,107]. Establishing a professional identity as a teacher is viewed as essential for interpreting teaching experiences, practices, and professional growth^[108].

With strong reflections of identity among teachers, it generally explained their position towards classroom inclusivity. ABE believes that “respect for diversity was also core to the work that we do as educators”^[59]. The context of respect in inclusive education transcends how teachers perceived their role in social transformations, and how they interact with the spaces that they are in. For example, teachers “...make sure that [their] activities are respectful and use a personal learning approach, so students are always taken into account.” Similarly, scholars have highlighted the role of ABE in bridging the digital divide, emphasizing its potential to address gaps in technological access and skills. Harris and Shelswell^[109] argued that like the integration of ICT in ABE curricula, the teachers demonstrate a strong commitment to inclusivity, understanding that their roles extend beyond traditional teaching practices. With innovative strategies and tools, they empower students to bridge societal divides and develop competencies that enhance both their academic and vocational prospects with strategies ensuring student-led project-based activities that emphasize problem solving using appropriate technologies^[109]. In examining the quality of learning, inclusive education necessitates a student-centered curriculum that prioritizes student engagement and adaptive pedagogical strategies, alongside an environment conducive to accommodating learning needs^[2]. In light of this, Filipino teachers were likely to be innovative and adaptive when dealing with their students’ unique learning needs—a critical component of student-centered instruction at the core of ABE.

Further, there was evidence regarding the opportunities of ABE in Philippine basic education. For example, papers were linking the underperformance of at-risk students to attributes of their often economically disadvantaged communities or families, which may be deficient in educational resources at home or in their awareness of the significance of early socialization experiences^[110,111,3,112]. Filipino teachers were aware of this explaining “it is the language barrier, the lack of parent’s cooperation and support.” The shift towards a more family-centric approach in delivering care for children with disabilities highlights the importance of professionals promoting strong relationships with parents^[113]. For children with disabilities, parental involvement enhances developmental progress, enriches educational outcomes, boosts academic performance, and reduces the likelihood of school withdrawal^[114,115]. Specifically, adult basic education courses often align with the school-based curriculum, allowing parents to gain content knowledge directly applicable to their child’s homework and academic tasks^[116,117]. This alignment helps bridge home and school learning, enabling parents to engage more meaningfully with their child’s education^[118]. In the ABE perspective, parental involvement was long seen to be the foundation of its effective implementation as parents serve as significant agents for transforming classroom environment^[119]. Derman-Sparks and Ramsey^[120] propose that through collaboration, resource sharing, and the development of strategies to address challenges with parents, both teacher educators and teacher candidates can enhance their professional practices. Promoting strong school-family relationships through ABE encourages Filipino teachers to work collaboratively with parents to overcome barriers such as language differences and limited parental support which creates an inclusive and supportive educational environment for children with special needs.

Institutional support was also essential in integrating ABE in basic education similar to parental involvement and support. Teachers believed that “Increased learning focused on inclusive practices and access to support tools are necessary for advancement maintenance” pointing out institutional barriers like inadequate training and variability in policies “that weaken overall cost-effective mainstreaming of inclusive education.” Early ABE studies also shared similar perspective arguing institutional contexts could determine the success of anti-bias attitude within their organization. Smith^[121] argued that the presence of professional development focused on anti-racism within a community college campus significantly influenced the development in anti-racist practices, pedagogical approaches, and interpersonal interactions. Findings revealed that institutional support promotes anti-racist practices among community college employees, including peer-led anti-racist learning communities as an effective strategy, and highlighted the need for proactive leadership to sustain and support these communities. For example, to advance and establish exemplary, authentic, and up-to-date best practices for anti-racist learning communities, Turi et al.^[122] suggest that institutional practices should incorporate organizational learning within group settings, ensuring that anti-racist initiatives are continuously informed by shared knowledge and collective reflection. Evidently, Filipino teachers “frequently consult with the special education teachers and counselors to see what works for the individual students in devising strategies.” Some also attend LAC sessions and in-service trainings to “ask [professionals] for technical assistance.” These aspects reflect institutional support at the core of ABE in inclusive education, as it encourages teachers to collaborate, devise instructional plans, and seek professional help within their learning community.

Inclusive education in the Philippines is still in its development years. Filipino teachers operating within inclusive classrooms may experience frustration stemming from insufficient skills and professional competence necessary to effectively support the learning of students with special needs^[11]. Similarly, regular teachers often face challenges in effectively implementing inclusive education because of lacking in essential resources, educational background, and training required to adequately support students with disabilities^[123].

Ainscow^[124] posited that inclusive education involves the implementation of inclusive principles aimed at reducing exclusion, bias, and obstacles to learning, ensuring equitable treatment for all individuals. In Philippine setting, inclusive education includes the delivery of educational opportunities to all school-age children including creating an environment where students can study alongside their peers which benefits the educational experience for all children. This paper outlined the application of ABE within the inclusive education framework as they share common ideologies toward equity, diversity, and social justice. Both ABE and inclusive education aim to create learning environments where every individual, regardless of background or identity, feels respected, represented, and empowered.

6. Conclusion

This study emphasized the potential of ABE as a framework for strengthening inclusivity within Philippine basic education. With the essence of respect for diversity and challenging biases, ABE aligns with the objectives of inclusive education, advocating for environments that embrace all students, including those from marginalized or diverse backgrounds. Filipino teachers demonstrated a positive outlook towards inclusive practices, valuing classroom management strategies that acknowledge and respect student differences. ABE principles encourage teachers to actively participate in social transformation, encouraging a culture that not only promotes diversity but also addresses social justice within educational settings. This study suggested that when ABE is integrated effectively, it can support inclusive teaching practices that benefit students and help bridge gaps between students' home and school experiences, particularly through collaboration with families and institutional support.

The study has several implications for educators, policymakers, and educational institutions. First, it highlighted the need for teacher training programs that emphasize the principles of ABE, equipping teachers with the skills to create inclusive environments and to manage classrooms that reflect a deep respect for diversity. This can develop a culture in schools where social justice, equity, and inclusivity are normalized and actively practiced. The study also underscored the role of schools in addressing the educational needs of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which may lack access to educational resources. This is particularly relevant for Philippine education, where many at-risk students face challenges due to socio-economic limitations. By supporting ABE principles, teachers can work with parents to enhance children's educational outcomes and address gaps in their early socialization and learning experiences. The study believed that school leaders and policymakers should consider institutional support mechanisms that bolster inclusive education efforts, such as anti-bias training and resource allocation for special needs students. Establishing support structures like peer-led anti-bias learning communities and providing access to professional development opportunities, educational institutions can create sustainable frameworks that support both teachers and students. These measures are not only essential for the growth of ABE but also fundamental in a cohesive learning environment where inclusivity and respect for diversity are embedded in the school culture.

There were limitations that needed to be addressed. First, the findings are drawn from a sample limited to Filipino teachers, which may restrict the generalizability of the results to broader contexts or other countries where educational practices and challenges differ. Additionally, the study relies heavily on teachers' perspectives, which, while insightful, may not fully capture the complexities of implementing ABE in diverse and under-resourced educational settings. Future research could include perspectives from other stakeholders, such as parents, students, and policymakers, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how ABE can be applied effectively within inclusive education frameworks. Another limitation is the reliance on qualitative data, which, while rich in detail, may be subject to biases and interpretations specific

to individual teachers. Quantitative studies could provide additional insights into the efficacy of ABE practices and their measurable impact on student outcomes, particularly in inclusive settings. Lastly, while the study emphasized the importance of institutional support, it does not extensively examine the specific resources or policy changes required to implement ABE on a larger scale. Future studies could address these gaps by evaluating the infrastructure necessary to integrate ABE in a sustainable and scalable manner within the educational system.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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