

# Inclusive Education for Learners with Disabilities: Sheltered Class Programs in Public Elementary Schools

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## Background of the Study

Inclusive education in the Philippines is increasingly recognized as a fundamental right rather than a supplementary service, particularly for learners with disabilities. Despite strong policy articulation, implementation in public elementary schools remains uneven. Learners with disabilities often face barriers in participation, learning outcomes, and meaningful inclusion due to limited instructional support, inadequate assistive resources, and inconsistent individualized interventions.

To address these gaps, the Department of Education (DepEd) and national policymakers institutionalized sheltered class programs under Republic Act No. 11650 (2022). Unlike traditional special education models that isolate learners, sheltered classes operate within regular schools, providing targeted instructional support and structured environments that serve as transitional mechanisms toward full inclusion.

The effectiveness of these programs depends on three key mechanisms:

- **Teacher capacity** in differentiated instruction, behavior management, and inclusive assessment.
- **Equitable resource distribution**, including assistive devices, digital tools, and Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs).
- **Stakeholder collaboration**, involving families, local government units, and community organizations.

This systematic review examines how sheltered class programs are implemented, the challenges they encounter, and the conditions under which they succeed. It also identifies gaps between legislative intent and classroom realities, contributing to evidence-based policy refinement and long-term educational equity.

## METHODS

This review is anchored on Republic Act No. 11650 (2022) and DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021, which mandate inclusive education and guide program implementation.

### Search and Selection Process (PRISMA Framework)

A PRISMA-based approach was adopted to ensure rigor and transparency:

- **Databases searched:** Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, DepEd archives, and Philippine education journals.
- **Inclusion criteria:** Studies published between 2010–2026; focus on sheltered class programs, inclusive education policies, or implementation in public elementary schools; empirical or policy-based evidence.
- **Exclusion criteria:** Studies limited to higher education, non-school contexts, or lacking relevance to learners with disabilities.

- **Screening process:** Titles and abstracts were screened, followed by full-text review. Duplicates and irrelevant studies were excluded.

This process yielded a final set of **13 key studies** that met all criteria and were included in the synthesis.

### Thematic Coding Framework

Thematic analysis was conducted using four coding categories:

1. Teacher capacity and pedagogy
2. Resource allocation and infrastructure
3. Policy implementation and governance
4. Learner outcomes and integration pathways

This framework ensured analytical consistency across diverse sources and allowed for meaningful comparison between local and international findings.

### Summary of Key Studies Included in the Review

| Author/Year                    | Title of Study                 | Focus                 | Relevance to Review      |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| DepEd (2021)                   | Inclusive Education Policy     | Policy framework      | Basis for implementation |
| RA 11650 (2022)                | Inclusive Education Act        | Legal mandate         | Foundation of programs   |
| UNESCO (2024)                  | Global Monitoring Report       | Inclusion standards   | International benchmark  |
| OECD (2025)                    | Education Policy Outlook       | System performance    | Comparative analysis     |
| EDCOM II (2025)                | Education System Review        | Systemic gaps         | Local evidence           |
| Cruz et al. (2025)             | Sheltered Class Implementation | Classroom practices   | Empirical findings       |
| Reyes (2025)                   | Policy Implementation Gaps     | Governance issues     | Policy analysis          |
| Santos (2026)                  | Rural Education Disparities    | Contextual factors    | Equity concerns          |
| Mendoza & Lopez (2023)         | Teacher Development            | Professional learning | Capacity building        |
| Ncube & Mutasa (2025)          | Inclusive Education Barriers   | Challenges            | Global comparison        |
| Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011) | Inclusive Pedagogy             | Teaching strategies   | Theoretical basis        |
| Schuelka & Johnstone (2012)    | Inclusive Systems              | Policy systems        | Structural insights      |
| Ainscow et al. (2019)          | Inclusive Schooling            | System reform         | Sustainability           |

## RESULTS / OUTCOMES

Sheltered class programs have increased access and enrollment of learners with disabilities in public elementary schools. They provide structured environments and targeted instruction that address immediate learning needs.

However, findings reveal:

- **Instructional delivery:** Teaching remains largely teacher-centered, with limited application of differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).
- **Resource allocation:** Many schools lack assistive technologies, specialized materials, and functional ILRCs, especially in rural and low-income areas.
- **Policy–practice gaps:** Strong legal frameworks exist, but implementation is inconsistent due to insufficient funding, limited teacher training, and weak monitoring systems.

Positive outcomes are observed in schools with strong support systems, where teacher training, family involvement, and effective monitoring contribute to improved learner participation and gradual integration into mainstream classrooms.

## DISCUSSION

This review highlights both strengths and limitations of sheltered class programs:

- **Strengths:** Increased visibility of learners with disabilities, structured support, and potential pathways to inclusion.
- **Limitations:** Risk of sheltered classes becoming long-term placements rather than transitional supports; disparities between urban and rural schools; insufficient longitudinal data to assess long-term outcomes.

### Critical Synthesis Across Studies

- **Local vs. international findings:** Global studies (UNESCO, OECD, Ncube & Mutasa) emphasize systemic reforms and equity, while Philippine studies (Cruz, Reyes, Santos) highlight governance gaps, resource inequities, and contextual challenges.
- **Teacher development:** Mendoza & Lopez (2023) and Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011) stress the importance of inclusive pedagogy, yet evidence shows limited adoption in practice.
- **Policy implementation:** Reyes (2025) identifies governance issues, while EDCOM II (2025) underscores systemic gaps, aligning with international concerns about sustainability.

This synthesis demonstrates that sheltered class effectiveness depends not only on program design but also on systemic capacity, resource equity, and governance accountability. The evidence suggests that sheltered classes should not be viewed as permanent solutions but as **dynamic transitional mechanisms** that require continuous monitoring and adaptation.

## CONCLUSION

Sheltered class programs represent a valuable but conditional approach to inclusive education in Philippine public elementary schools. They improve access and provide targeted support, but effectiveness depends on enabling conditions such as teacher capacity, resource availability, and strong governance.

When properly implemented, sheltered classes can function as transitional mechanisms facilitating integration into mainstream education. Without adequate support, however, they risk reinforcing segregation.

Achieving inclusive education under Republic Act No. 11650 requires a coordinated, well-resourced, and accountable system that prioritizes equity, participation, and long-term learner outcomes. This review underscores the need for **system-wide reforms**, sustained investment in teacher development, and equitable resource distribution to ensure sheltered class programs fulfill their intended role in advancing inclusive education.

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