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Community Awareness towards Inclusive Education for Children with Learning Disabilities in Myanmar Educational Context

Boon Pan¹, Thea Czaireena T. Dizon²

¹ Inclusive Education, School of Advanced Studies, Saint Louis University, Myanmar

² Secondary Education, School of Teacher Education and Liberal Arts, Saint Louis University, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Although Myanmar has adopted an international legal framework through the Education Law (2007) and the Child Rights Law (2019), significant gaps exist between formal policies and practical implementation. Public awareness is still hampered by negative stigma, infrastructure constraints, and the influence of certain cultural and religious beliefs that contribute to the exclusion of children with learning disabilities. This literature review aims to explore the level of public awareness of inclusive education for children with learning disabilities in Myanmar and identify factors that hinder the transition from policy to practical inclusion. This study used a literature review method by analyzing various policy documents, previous studies, and reports on the educational context in Myanmar, including its impact on ethnic minority groups and children with disabilities. Findings indicate that the main challenges to inclusion in Myanmar include sociocultural factors such as the concept of "karma" that reinforces stigma, as well as a lack of school preparedness. Although school stakeholders generally support inclusion, they are hampered by a lack of specialized training, a rigid curriculum, overcrowded classes, language barriers, and uncertainty resulting from the ongoing political conflict. This leads many families to still choose special schools (separate) over inclusive schools. This article provides strategic recommendations for policymakers and education practitioners in Myanmar to focus not only on local aspects but also on investing in teacher training, providing adequate infrastructure, and community engagement campaigns. The study emphasizes the importance of viewing disability as part of human diversity to create an equitable education ecosystem for all children.

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Corresponding Author:

Thea Czaireena T. Dizon

Secondary Education, School of Teacher Education and Liberal Arts, Saint Louis University, Philippines

Email: thea.czaireena22@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving world of learning and teaching, inclusive education stands as a significant symbol of progress as it is being widely recognized as a course to let students

17 with special needs have equal access to education and to also break the stigma surrounding them (Ahmed et al., 2025; Shaeffer, 2019). Different countries and nations are actively implementing its principles into the legal aspect of their educational policies because they are driven by a profound commitment to equity and human rights (Mendoza & Heymann, 2024). This global acceptance began in foundational documents such as the Salamanca Statement that puts emphasis on how children with special needs must not have merely access to schooling but should also be able to thrive within regular educational environments (Tonegawa, 2021; Waite, 2015). This is not merely an abstract ideal, and as, according to Mendoza and Heymann (2024), it is influenced by the dreadful reality that approximately 150 million children worldwide live with disabilities and that urgent necessity of inclusive education should be taken action upon.

Consistent portrayal of inclusive education as a united goal and its constantly being talked about by international sectors exerts a significant pressure on countries like Myanmar (Oo et al., 2025; Waite, 2015). This pressure encourages them to align their educational policies with these international standards that suggests that Myanmar's recent legislative and policy shifts towards inclusion should not just be internal decisions but also should provide action towards it. The challenge encompasses the process of translating these policies and global ideals into something sustainable that can provide local realities that will genuinely benefit all learners. This would require discovering different complex socio-economic and cultural landscapes to ensure that inclusion is truly embodied in every classroom.

The successful implementation of inclusive education is mainly dependent on the attitudes and awareness of the stakeholders, particularly teachers and the broader community (Charitaki et al., 2024; Kenny et al., 2023; Vlachou & Tsirantonaki, 2023). Teachers' attitudes are identified as one of the most important elements for the successful progression of inclusiveness (Soe & Nwe, 2019). While teachers generally exhibit positive attitudes towards inclusion, these positive inclinations are often negatively influenced by a number of barriers. These barriers include lack of funding, insufficient political support, and limited opportunities for professional training (Kamran et al., 2023; Lindner et al., 2023).

Furthermore, teachers in Myanmar have articulated specific concerns that impact their attitudes and practices (Maber et al., 2022; Phyo & Kopp, 2026). These include worries about the stress and apparent weaknesses of children with disabilities (40.3% of teachers), potential bullying and discrimination from peers or ego-centered parents (25.7%), the burden of overcrowded classrooms and insufficient number of teachers (23.4%), and the perceived delay in the teaching process due to different learning abilities (18.8%) (Aung & Sakurai, 2023).

In this context, this literature review critically examines the evolving landscape of community awareness and perspectives towards inclusive education for children with learning disabilities within the Myanmar educational context and highlights the policy advancements, implementation challenges, and the role of stakeholder perceptions and systemic support in shaping inclusive educational opportunities for all. The purpose of

this literature review is to provide a comprehensive understanding of current research and best practices in special education within inclusive education settings.

2. ²³METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach through a systematic literature review to integrate findings from credible scientific sources. This method was chosen to produce an in-depth analysis of the gap between inclusive education policies and their practical implementation, particularly in navigating the complexities of Myanmar's unique sociopolitical context.

The data collection process was conducted through a comprehensive search of leading academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate using relevant strategic keywords. This search included an in-depth analysis of public awareness of disabilities, national education policies, and the impact of armed conflict on the education landscape to provide a holistic and factual picture of the situation.

¹¹To ensure the validity and relevance of the data, this study applied strict inclusion criteria to the documents analyzed. Data sources included scholarly journal articles, official reports from international organizations such as the UN and NGOs, and legal documents from Myanmar authorities, including the 2007 Education Law and the 2019 Child Rights Law, published during the most recent policy development period.

Conversely, exclusion criteria were consistently applied to eliminate literature that did not address the specific context of Myanmar or did not directly address the issue of learning disabilities in children. This step was taken to maintain the study's focus on identifying gaps in policy implementation, ensuring that the research findings have a strong theoretical foundation and align with the initial objectives.

The analysis focused on legal and sociocultural dimensions to map the effectiveness of national regulations against international standards and the influence of local beliefs. This study evaluated the adequacy of domestic legal instruments in protecting the right to education while exploring the profound influence of cultural concepts such as "Karma," which often create stigma and act as non-technical barriers in the social environment.

Finally, this study identified various operational obstacles in the field, ranging from limited infrastructure to the rigidity of the education curriculum. Using thematic content analysis techniques, this study compared official policy rhetoric with sociological realities, ultimately formulating integrative solutions in the form of strengthening teacher capacity and active community involvement as strategic steps to overcome educational barriers in Myanmar.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Legal Policies in Myanmar

The Myanmar government has strived to align national inclusive education standards with international legal instruments through a series of progressive policy reforms. From

the Education Law (2007) to the Child Rights Law (2019), this legal framework explicitly prohibits discrimination based on disability and recognizes the language rights of ethnic minorities to address barriers to access to education. These efforts are reinforced by amendments to the National Education Law mandating the provision of services for persons with disabilities, as well as the "Model Inclusive Schools" project initiative, which serves as centers of educational excellence at the primary and secondary levels to drive systemic transformation.

Despite this comprehensive legal framework, implementation on the ground still faces significant challenges due to unequal distribution of resources and complex external factors. Research indicates a sharp disparity in access, particularly outside of Yangon, exacerbated by high education costs and a lack of financial assistance schemes for affected families. Furthermore, ongoing political instability and conflict in Myanmar create practical challenges to school security and law enforcement. In response, adaptive strategies were developed through the Joint Response Framework (JRF) to protect vulnerable learners, but the long-term effectiveness of these pilot projects still requires in-depth evaluation to achieve real and sustainable inclusivity.

Community Awareness and Perceptions

Society

The successful implementation of inclusive education in Myanmar is influenced by the perceptions of various stakeholders such as the parents, teachers, and school administrators. The overall perceptions on children with disabilities in Myanmar are often affected by the locals' views of vulnerability and dependence. This viewpoint can highly create a barrier to full inclusion because it may lead to having a closed mindset and being more protective rather than creating empowering approaches to education. School staff usually perceive students with disabilities as more vulnerable and dependent compared to their peers with no disabilities. This is one of the challenges in providing a supportive counseling environment because these students with disabilities also aim to feel valued and respected in the educational setting. A significant factor to this perception is a general lack of understanding and awareness about the characteristics of disabilities and would then lead to stigma within society. Studies also indicate that the concept of inclusive education is not yet widely understood or embraced by the general public because there are still many professionals and parents that remain unaware of the educational opportunities available to children with disabilities.

Religious Influence

Deeply rooted cultural and religious beliefs in Myanmar, particularly the Buddhist concept of "Karma," significantly influence societal perceptions of disability. Disability is often interpreted as a consequence or punishment for past actions, which, while potentially inspiring sympathy, also risks perpetuating stigmatization and feelings of inferiority for families. The view that suffering is an inevitable part of one's spiritual journey tends to hinder the acceptance of full inclusion rights, as the condition is perceived as a "fate" to be accepted rather than a systemic challenge to be overcome.

These cultural norms create a fundamental clash with modern, child-centered pedagogical approaches, where existing social expectations often limit the active participation of students with disabilities in the classroom. Consequently, many parents prefer special education to inclusive classes due to the social pressure and shame inherent in these traditional perceptions. Addressing these challenges requires culturally sensitive community interventions and sustained public awareness campaigns to shift the paradigm of disability from being perceived as a spiritual consequence to a natural part of human diversity worthy of empowerment.

Stakeholder Perspectives

There has been a significant positive trend in the perceptions of parents, teachers, and school administrators in Myanmar toward inclusive education, where education is seen as a crucial instrument for the social development and future independence of children with special needs. Parents are now more actively advocating for their children's educational rights to achieve social acceptance and employment opportunities, shifting from the isolationist practices of the past stigma. Furthermore, educators and school administrators generally demonstrate a philosophical openness to diversity. Research highlights that practical experience and specialized training are key factors in increasing confidence and commitment to instructional leadership, with in-service teachers tending to have more inclusive attitudes than pre-service teachers.

However, the potential for these positive attitudes is often hampered by the inadequate operational preparedness of the education system. Key obstacles include the high workload of developing Individual Learning Programs (IEPs), limited access to professional training, and a lack of supporting facilities and specific knowledge regarding inclusive policy implementation strategies. This systemic unpreparedness, rather than stakeholder resistance, is the primary barrier to concretely realizing the vision of inclusion in schools. Therefore, a strategic shift is needed from simply raising general awareness to competency-based professional development that focuses on the practical application of inclusive principles, adaptive resource management, and inter-stakeholder collaboration to narrow the gap between policy and field reality.

Challenges in Implementation

Myanmar still faces significant challenges in implementing inclusive education effectively across the country even though there are policies that are already implemented. These challenges range from issues related to teacher preparedness and resource limitations to the impact of socio-economic factors and ongoing conflict.

Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development Gaps

A major and consistently reported challenge is the insufficient professional development and training available for teachers to handle and teach children with disabilities. Teachers frequently express that they lack the knowledge and practical skills required for inclusive teaching. This often leads to teachers being hesitant to fully accept children with disabilities into their classrooms. This is not because of merely

discrimination but rather from their own personal feelings of being unprepared and inexperienced. With this, the availability of qualified teachers is lacking, especially in remote areas. This is what is observed in the remote and rural regions of Myanmar. This can highly affect the students' learning experience as well as academic development. While there are volunteer teachers who fill these gaps regarding the qualifications of teachers in terms of teaching students with disabilities, there are concerns when it comes to the consistency of the teaching process and also the quality of teaching that they would provide. Another small but significant factor that affects this challenge is the low salaries and limited career opportunities for teachers. It can be seen that this also affects their personal commitment and passion for teaching.

Rigidity of Curriculum and Language Barriers in the Classroom

Pedagogical challenges in inclusive education efforts in Myanmar stem from the rigidity of the standard, exam-oriented curriculum, which limits teachers' flexibility in adapting to students with disabilities. This situation is exacerbated by the dominance of Bamar cultural and linguistic ideology in the national education system, which has historically marginalized the languages and cultures of ethnic minorities. Consequently, minority students often struggle to gain legitimacy in a system that lacks recognition of diversity, where massive language barriers—with reports that up to 80–90% of students experience instructional barriers due to lack of Burmese language proficiency—are a major barrier to active community participation in inclusive education.

Resource and Infrastructure Limitations

The implementation of inclusive education in Myanmar faces significant obstacles due to limited resources and inadequate infrastructure, with the education budget being deemed too small to support comprehensive reforms. This phenomenon is a common challenge in developing Southeast Asian countries, which must balance the need for education funding with unstable economic growth. The impact is evident in the scarcity of appropriate teaching materials and the condition of school facilities, such as classrooms, libraries, and sanitation facilities, which are often in poor condition and unfriendly to students with disabilities.

In addition to physical constraints, the disproportionate teacher-to-student ratio and overcrowding in classrooms place additional burdens on educators in providing individual attention to students with special needs. Practitioners recommend an ideal ratio of 20:1 to create a conducive inclusive environment, but the reality on the ground demonstrates a shortage of experts and qualified personnel. Therefore, a transparent approach is needed in the education system to ensure the allocation of dedicated funds for accessible infrastructure and the recruitment of professional staff, while continuing to advocate for the long-term effectiveness of these inclusive education investments.

Socio-Economic Factors and Impact of Conflict

Myanmar has been identified as a low income country as well as a country with low human development. Socio-economic challenges are especially difficult for children

with learning needs as it is affecting their vulnerability and limiting their access to educational opportunities. Historically, Myanmar has shown limited awareness and understanding regarding children with learning disabilities, often associating these conditions with stigma. While awareness has improved, the school enrollment count for children with disabilities still is low in comparison to the overall population. Another barrier is also the impact of ongoing conflict and political instability. The 2021 conflicts have severely affected the education sector. The conflict led to having unsafe school environments and also having human rights violated. These conditions make it incredibly difficult to maintain a functional educational system and also implement nuanced inclusive practices.

Support Models

Improving teacher preparedness for inclusive education requires a fundamental shift from theoretical instruction to competency-based training and hands-on practice. This includes implementing specialized courses that equip educators with skills in curriculum adaptation, teaching materials creation, and effective communication techniques with students with disabilities to create conducive learning environments. A successful example of this model is seen in UNESCO's online course for teachers in Myanmar, launched in November 2023, demonstrating that targeted training can overcome teacher reluctance and build practical confidence. Investing in context-specific professional development and integrating psychosocial support is a key priority for improving the quality of inclusive pedagogy.

Beyond technical readiness, successful inclusion relies heavily on community engagement that respects local cultures and collaboration among educators. The role of Community-Based Religious Organizations (CBROs) serves as a crucial example in building trust within ethnic minority groups (EMGs) to manage independent education systems in areas neglected by conflict. While these community initiatives are effective in increasing access, there are complex challenges in balancing the vision of international-standard education and English language proficiency with efforts to preserve local culture and identity. This demonstrates that community engagement is not merely superficial support but a crucial foundation for creating a vision of quality, culturally inclusive education.

Discussion

Research findings indicate that although Myanmar's legal framework for inclusive education aligns with international standards, there is a significant "implementation gap" between macro policies and practice on the ground. This phenomenon aligns with Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy theory, which states that policy success is largely determined by implementing actors and the availability of resources at the grassroots level (Chang & Brewer, 2023; Guimarães et al., 2022). Sporadic initiatives such as "Model Inclusive Schools" emphasize the existing inequality of access, where inclusive education is privileged in stable areas like Yangon. Previous studies, such as Falb et al. (2022), emphasized that without equitable resource distribution and financial support

for families in remote areas, inclusive policies will only create new social stratification that marginalizes vulnerable groups in conflict zones.

On the sociocultural dimension, the influence of the concept of "karma" is a major non-technical barrier shaping the perception of disability as a spiritual consequence or inevitable fate. This paradigm aligns with the medical model of disability, which views learning barriers as internal problems that must be "accepted", rather than viewing them through the social model of disability, which focuses on environmental and systemic barriers (Zaks, 2024). The social pressures and stigma stemming from these traditional values often force parents to choose segregation. Therefore, deconstructing stigma through culturally sensitive community interventions is crucial, as proposed by Bronfenbrenner's systems ecology theory, where cultural values at the macrosystem level significantly influence children's interactions at the microsystem level of the school.

From a human resources perspective, the dynamics of educator attitudes indicate that practical experience is a key factor in reducing "professional anxiety". The finding that in-service teachers are more optimistic than preservice teachers supports Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, which states that enactive mastery increases one's confidence in completing complex tasks such as developing an Individualized Learning Program (IEP) (Ouyang et al., 2023; Poluektova et al., 2023; Woodcock & Tournaki, 2023). While increasing positive parental attitudes represents powerful social capital, this potential will remain latent without the support of instructional leadership from school administrators. Previous studies Chander et al. (2020) emphasized that sustainable educational change requires a combination of policy pressure, managerial support, and systematic competency-based professional development.

Systemic barriers to inclusive education in Myanmar are rooted in a rigid, exam-orientated curriculum structure, exacerbated by the dominance of Bamar linguistic ideology (Maber et al., 2018). The phenomenon of instructional barriers affecting 80–90% of students due to language barriers reflects what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic violence', where the education system imposes the cultural capital of the dominant group, marginalizing minority identities. Previous studies emphasize that in highly competitive and inflexible environments, students with special needs are often the most impacted by budget constraints, inaccessible physical facilities, and teacher-student ratios that fall far short of ideal standards for adaptive learning (Jayasinghe et al., 2023; Sigalla & Kimario, 2025; Tukan & Susandi, 2025).

These conditions have further escalated due to the post-2021 political instability, which has crippled educational infrastructure and shifted the priority of inclusion to basic security needs. However, the emergence of Community-Based Religious Organizations (CBROs) in conflict areas demonstrates the Community Resilience Theory, where local actors assume the role of the absent state in maintaining the continuity of social services. As noted in a study of education in conflict zones, these organizations face the dilemma of "two faces of education": on the one hand, striving to meet international standards (Badrasawi et al., 2018; Thwin et al., 2025), but on the other, maintaining local cultural identity as a form of resistance to systemic

marginalization, which makes it a crucial pillar for the survival of disabled people in affected areas.

As a strategic implication, Myanmar requires a transformation from simply raising awareness to strengthening practical capacity through infrastructure investment and flexible curriculum reform. This approach aligns with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which emphasizes providing multiple modes of engagement and representation to accommodate learner diversity (Kelly et al., 2022; Roski et al., 2024; Rusconi & Squillaci, 2023). The use of online technology and collaboration with local religious leaders are not merely technical steps but multidimensional efforts to mitigate cultural stigma. Ultimately, achieving inclusion amidst ongoing crises requires synergy between legal alignment, transforming cultural perspectives, and developing human resource capacity that adapts to complex sociopolitical dynamics..

4. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Myanmar has made significant legislative efforts to align its national education system with international standards through the enactment of the Education Law (2007), the National Education Law (2014) and its 2015 amendments, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Law (2015), and the Child Rights Law (2019). These policies explicitly guarantee the right to education for children with disabilities and expand the scope of inclusivity for ethnic minority groups. However, a critical gap exists between policy formulation and implementation due to the limited availability of specialized institutions, the high cost burden on families, and sociocultural barriers rooted in the concept of "Karma." These traditional beliefs often fuel stigma and a preference for segregated education, necessitating a culturally sensitive public awareness campaign to shift the paradigm toward a child-centered pedagogical approach.

Although stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and administrators generally have positive attitudes toward the philosophy of inclusion, its effective implementation continues to be hampered by a lack of systemic preparedness and limited infrastructure. Educators often feel unprepared due to a lack of competency-based training, low compensation, and disproportionate workloads, exacerbated by political instability and ongoing conflict in Myanmar. Therefore, the sustainable success of inclusive education requires a transition from mere legislative efforts to concrete investments in practical teacher training, the development of accessible resources, and deep community engagement. The journey toward true inclusion in Myanmar must navigate socioeconomic complexities and traditional values to ensure that diversity is seen as part of human dignity, not merely a spiritual consequence.

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