

Inclusive Education in Context: A Comparative Survey of Profile, Practices and Challenges in Selected School Locations in the Schools Division of Albay

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Abstract

This study examined inclusive education in selected upland, coastal, and mainland schools in the Schools Division of Albay by comparing school profiles, practices, and challenges in serving learners with special needs. Anchored on the Dimensions of Belonging Framework Theory, Inclusion as Participation Model Theory, Inclusive Educators' Continuum of Change Theory, and the researcher's Inclusive Belonging Theory, the study used a descriptive quantitative research design. Data were gathered through a researcher-made and validated survey questionnaire administered to 253 teachers and school heads, with school data covering 126 learners with special needs. Frequency count, weighted mean, Likert-scale interpretation, and the Kruskal-Wallis H-test were used to analyze the data. Findings revealed that mainland schools had the highest number of learners with special needs, teachers handling them, and available inclusive education facilities, while upland schools had the least resources and experienced the greatest implementation challenges. Inclusive education practices were highest in mainland schools, followed by coastal schools, and lowest in upland schools. Challenges were most severe in upland schools, particularly in facilities, assistive technologies, budget, classroom spaces, collaboration, and teacher preparation. Significant differences were found in both inclusive education practices and challenges among the three school locations. The study concludes that school location strongly affects inclusive education implementation and recommends a targeted action plan addressing the distinct needs of upland, coastal, and mainland schools. The study supports SDG 4, SDG 10, SDG 11, and SDG 17 by promoting equitable, inclusive, and context-responsive education. Its sustainability impact lies in strengthening educational, institutional, community, and policy support systems for learners with special needs.

Keywords: Assistive Technologies, Coastal Schools, Inclusive Education, Learners with Special Needs, Mainland Schools, Professional Development, School Facilities, Teacher Preparation, Upland Schools

1. Introduction

Inclusive education remains a central concern in contemporary education because it seeks to ensure that all learners, regardless of ability, background, location, or circumstance, are provided equitable access to quality learning opportunities. In the context of the Schools Division of Albay, the implementation of inclusive education differs across upland, coastal, and mainland schools because each location presents distinct conditions related to learners with special needs, teacher preparedness, facilities, professional development, and school support systems. This study, therefore, examines the profile, practices, and challenges of inclusive education in these three school contexts to determine similarities and differences and to develop an action plan responsive to their specific needs.

Education is widely recognized as a universal right, but access to meaningful and inclusive learning remains uneven for many learners, especially those with special needs. Inclusive education goes beyond school attendance because it requires the creation of learning environments where all learners can participate, learn, and succeed regardless of ability, background, or social status. International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Salamanca Statement on Inclusive Education for Action on Special Needs Education SNED of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasize the need to ensure that learners with disabilities and special needs are not excluded from education. In the Philippines, inclusive education is supported by national policies and legal mandates. The 1987 Philippine Constitution guarantees the right to quality education, while RA 7277, RA 10533, and RA 11650 strengthen the legal foundation for protecting learners with disabilities and ensuring appropriate support. DepEd Orders such as DO 117, s. 1987, DO 42, s. 2021, and DO 44, s. 2021 further guide schools in implementing Special Needs Education through Individualized Education Plans, teacher capacity-building, and accessible learning materials. However, the translation of these mandates into actual school practice remains uneven because of differences in school location, resources, facilities, teacher training, and learner support systems. Upland schools often face isolation, limited infrastructure, and inadequate access to trained teachers and specialized resources. Coastal schools may

experience environmental disruptions such as typhoons and floods that affect instructional continuity. Mainland schools may have better access to facilities and support but may still encounter overcrowding and difficulty providing individualized assistance. These variations show that inclusive education cannot be implemented through a one-size-fits-all approach, especially in geographically diverse school settings.

The literature emphasizes that inclusive education requires equitable access, teacher preparedness, adequate resources, appropriate facilities, and supportive school cultures. UNESCO (2020) stressed that inclusive education is necessary to ensure equal access to quality education for all learners, but many schools continue to face barriers such as lack of trained teachers, insufficient learning materials, and unfavorable attitudes toward learners with disabilities. Weale (2026) reported that some top-performing secondary schools in England admitted fewer learners with disabilities, raising concerns about equality of access and accountability in inclusive education. Similarly, The Guardian (2026) cited that some high-performing secondary schools in England reflect systemic barriers to inclusion by enrolling fewer learners with special educational needs. Several studies also emphasize that school-level support and organizational sustainability are critical to inclusive practice. Altimari (2024) reported that the Integrated Day program in North Haven schools fostered inclusive education through multi-age grouping and cooperative learning, but its discontinuation raised concerns about the sustainability of inclusive programs. Campanile (2026) claimed that smaller class sizes in New York City schools could support learners with special needs by allowing teachers to provide more individualized attention, although staff shortages, limited resources, and lack of learning spaces remain major implementation challenges. Foster (2026) discussed technology-oriented initiatives that integrate ICTs and critical thinking into inclusive education programs to prepare all learners, including those with diverse needs, for the future. Teacher practice is another major theme in the literature. Deignan (2022) cited that inclusive literacy practices are equality-oriented approaches that promote equal opportunities for all learners. Smith et.al (2024) explained that inclusive literacy practices include teaching strategies and services that allow learners to participate equally in authentic learning experiences and student-centered activities. Kelley (2021) discussed the role of teachers in developing children's early literacy skills, while Singh (2024) stressed that teachers support and nurture learner diversity through developmentally appropriate and inclusive classroom strategies. Kampen (2020) further discussed that inclusive literacy practices require teachers to understand what each learner brings into the classroom and to provide safe, purposeful, nurturing, and equality-oriented learning environments. Inclusive education is also associated with differentiated instruction, diversity-responsive pedagogy, and learner-centered classroom practices. Horrace (2024) mentioned that play-based learning can promote inclusivity by encouraging curiosity, engagement, and participation among diverse learners. Koch (2023) claimed that inclusive educational practices help learners develop empathy and sensitivity toward peers with different needs. Dean (2019) discussed individualized educational plans, small group learning, active learning, and project-based learning as teacher practices that respond to diverse classroom needs. Parrish (2019) explained that diversity-focused classrooms differ from traditional classrooms because instruction is tailored to individually different learners rather than requiring all students to adapt to a standard curriculum. Perkins (2024) claimed that more teachers now value pedagogies that embrace learner diversity, although many regular education teachers remain unprepared for diversity-oriented instructional practices.

Local literature similarly highlights the need for developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive teaching. Ramirez (2019) discussed that teachers' inclusive practices serve as the foundation for training and educational empowerment. Rosendo (2019) stated that developmentally appropriate teaching practices are based on knowledge of children's learning growth at each age and stage. De Leon (2019) discussed that inclusive literacy is reflected in developmentally appropriate practices that consider each child's interests, skills, and developmental needs. Deloso (2021) explained that inclusive literacy and developmentally appropriate practices also consider learners' cultural backgrounds, values, traditions, and community practices. Philippine basic education literature also emphasizes literacy, teacher capacity-building, and responsiveness to learner diversity. Mendes (2021) discussed that teachers apply developmentally appropriate practices in classroom-based literacy instruction to minimize learning gaps and improve learning outcomes. Llego (2019) described DepED efforts to capacitate Grades 1–3 teachers in improving literacy instruction through sustainable training programs and collaborative faculty learning partnerships. Mendoza (2023) cited that one DepED priority is improving literacy instruction by strengthening foundational skills. Diaz (2023) stressed that teachers facilitate learning for diverse learners by recognizing individual differences in ethnicity, socio-economic status, and overall development. Dulay (2024) described inclusive education in the Philippines as an evolving field that seeks to ensure quality education for all Filipino learners regardless of ability, culture, background, and socio-economic status. Estanislao (2023) emphasized that teachers must understand diversity and individual differences and become culturally sensitive and culturally responsive.

Globally, inclusive education is framed as a rights-based and equity-oriented educational responsibility. UNESCO (2020), Weale (2026), The Guardian (2026), Campanile (2026), and Foster (2026) collectively show that even developed education systems continue to face issues of access, sustainability, resource adequacy, staff readiness, and institutional accountability in serving learners with special needs. In the Philippine context, inclusive education is supported by laws, policies, and DepEd initiatives, but implementation challenges remain. Raguindin et. al (2020) assessed the skills and dispositions of Filipino teachers toward inclusive education and found that Filipino teacher-respondents had higher positive attitudes and

efficacy compared with Thai counterparts. Macabenta et. al (2023) found that Filipino teachers demonstrated competence and commitment in adopting inclusive education policies but still encountered challenges such as insufficient readiness and limited expertise. Paguirigan (2020) found that many participants had not undergone inclusive education training and that bullying, limited resources, and inadequate facilities hindered inclusive education. Lebeco et. al (2023) found that teachers believed parental involvement is essential in inclusive education decision-making and support systems. Within local school contexts, differentiated instruction and inclusive strategies are important but difficult to sustain. Wakat et. al (2023) found that language teachers used diversified instructional materials, differentiated communication media, and inclusive instructional activities, although limited time affected implementation. Ramos (2023) found that elementary teachers had only an average level of proficiency in diversity-filled differentiated instruction. Maming (2022) found that teachers demonstrated very high proficiency in diversity-based differentiated instruction, but its time-consuming nature remained a key challenge. Magayon et. al (2020) found that diversity-oriented differentiated learning activities made lessons more interesting and motivating. Balita et. l (2023) found that diversity-enriched differentiated instruction improved higher-order thinking skills, especially critical and analytical thinking. Hatmanto et. al (2023) found that teachers had positive beliefs toward differentiated instruction but encountered constraints related to resources and assessment adaptation. In the specific setting of upland, coastal, and mainland schools in Albay, inclusive education must be understood in relation to geographic and institutional realities. Upland schools may experience shortages in facilities and support services; coastal schools may need stronger teacher training and continuity measures; and mainland schools may require sustained innovation, assessment adaptation, and facility improvement. This local comparison is important because it explains how inclusive education practices and challenges differ across school environments.

This study is grounded in the Dimensions of Belonging Framework Theory, the Inclusion as Participation Model Theory, and the Inclusive Educators' Continuum of Change Theory. These theories support the researcher's proposed Inclusive Belonging Theory, which emphasizes that inclusive education becomes meaningful when learners are accepted, valued, supported, and recognized as part of the school community. The Dimensions of Belonging Framework Theory by Carter and Biggs (2021) explains belonging as being welcome, known, accepted, supported, heard, involved, befriended, and needed in school. This theory supports the study because learners in selected schools in the Schools Division of Albay have different profiles, abilities, needs, and learning situations. It emphasizes that inclusive education should create school environments where learners are respected, accepted, and supported by teachers, peers, and the wider school community. The Inclusion as Participation Model Theory by Edström, Gardelli and Backman (2022) explains that inclusion requires active participation, not merely physical presence. Learners must be engaged in classroom discussions, learning activities, peer interactions, and school programs. This theory is relevant because barriers such as limited facilities, lack of learning materials, lack of teacher training, and difficulty accessing support services may restrict participation in upland, coastal, and mainland schools. The Inclusive Educators' Continuum of Change Theory by Somma and Bennett (2020) emphasizes that teachers gradually develop inclusive beliefs, attitudes, and practices through training, experience, and support. This theory applies directly to the study because teachers are the main implementers of inclusive education. Their preparedness, attitudes, instructional strategies, and access to professional development influence learners' experiences of inclusion. The conceptual basis of the study follows an Input-Process-Output framework. The inputs include the profile of schools in terms of learners with special needs, teachers handling them, facilities, and professional development, as well as the practices and challenges of inclusive education in upland, coastal, and mainland schools. The process involves data gathering, analysis, interpretation, and preparation of a proposed action plan. The output is a proposed action plan or developmental plan intended to support school heads and teachers in strengthening inclusive education practices.

Previous research has provided important insights into inclusive education, teacher competence, differentiated instruction, inclusive literacy practices, and challenges in implementing inclusive education. Tjenberg et. al (2023) found that teachers used multimodal methods and didactic flexibility in response to diverse literacy needs. Valtierra et. al (2019) found that inclusive literacy practices exposed learners to more nurturing, equitable, and conducive learning environments. Block (2022) identified structured reading lessons, explicit reading approaches, learner autonomy, and collaborative learning as inclusive practices in reading comprehension. Sharma et. al (2021) found that teachers' inclusive practices were shaped by attitudes and instructional management efficacy. Koutsiouri et. al (2023) identified disadvantaged school location and differences in perceptions as challenges to inclusive literacy practice. Gandara et. al (2021) found that teachers' communicative practices stimulated learners' interest and motivation. Gunay et. al (2023) found that inclusive literacy practices were influenced by teachers' positive attitudes and beliefs. Rugambuka et. al (2023) found significant relationships between teachers' attitudes toward diversity and factors such as gender, educational attainment, and position. Tjenberg et. al (2023) found that teachers relied on multimodal instruction to support diverse literacy practices. Ticknor (2020) found that teachers addressed challenges against equitable teaching and showed positive attitudes toward teaching diverse learners. Despite these contributions, many studies focus on inclusive education at general, national, or broad institutional levels and do not sufficiently examine how specific geographic contexts affect inclusive education implementation. Studies such as UNESCO (2020) and Campanile (2026) identify resource limitations and insufficient teacher training as common challenges, but they do not fully explain how these issues differ among upland, coastal, and mainland schools. This study addresses that gap by comparing inclusive education practices and challenges in upland,

coastal, and mainland schools in Albay. It links school location with actual implementation realities, including differences in facilities, teacher training, support mechanisms, and contextual barriers. The study is therefore justified by the need for a context-responsive action plan that recognizes both common and location-specific challenges in inclusive education.

This study aligns most directly with SDG 4 – Quality Education because it examines how schools can provide inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for learners with special needs. The focus on inclusive education practices, teacher preparedness, facilities, and professional development supports the broader goal of ensuring that all learners can access meaningful and supportive education. The study also relates to SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities because it addresses barriers experienced by learners with special needs and examines how schools in different locations may provide unequal levels of support. By comparing upland, coastal, and mainland schools, the study highlights the need for fairer distribution of resources, teacher support, and inclusive education services. The study further supports SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities because it recognizes the role of school location and community conditions in shaping educational inclusion. Upland, coastal, and mainland communities have different environmental, geographic, and socio-economic contexts, and inclusive education must respond to these realities. Finally, the study contributes to SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals because inclusive education requires collaboration among learners, teachers, school heads, parents, community members, education leaders, and other stakeholders. The proposed action plan can strengthen coordinated support systems for inclusive education across school types.

The study contributes to educational sustainability by providing evidence on how inclusive education can be strengthened in geographically diverse schools. Its findings can guide teachers and school heads in improving instructional strategies, professional development programs, facilities, and learner support mechanisms. It also contributes to socio-economic and community sustainability by promoting educational access for learners with special needs, particularly those in disadvantaged or geographically challenged school contexts. When inclusive education is improved, learners are given better opportunities to participate in school and develop competencies that support long-term personal and social development. The study supports institutional sustainability by helping school leaders and education stakeholders design location-specific interventions rather than relying on uniform approaches. Its proposed action plan may serve as a practical basis for improving inclusive education policies, resource allocation, teacher training, and school-based support systems. Lastly, the study contributes to policy and governance sustainability because it connects national inclusive education mandates with actual implementation realities in upland, coastal, and mainland schools. By identifying differences in practices and challenges across school types, the study provides evidence that can support more responsive, equitable, and context-sensitive inclusive education planning.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study used the descriptive research design. This design was appropriate because the study aimed to describe the characteristics of the schools and respondents without manipulating variables. Specifically, it was used to examine the profile of schools, the inclusive education practices implemented in upland, coastal, and mainland schools, the challenges encountered in these school contexts, and the similarities and differences in their practices and challenges. The same design also supported the development of proposed action plans based on the findings.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in selected upland, coastal, and mainland schools in Albay. These school locations represented different geographical and institutional contexts where inclusive education practices and challenges may vary. The focus on these three school types allowed the study to compare how inclusive education is implemented across diverse school environments within the Albay Division.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents were composed of teachers and school principals from the selected upland, coastal, and mainland schools in Albay. The upland school group included 46 teachers and one principal. The coastal school group included 56 teachers and one principal. The mainland school group included 148 teachers and one principal. These respondents served as the primary sources of data on school profile, inclusive education practices, and implementation challenges.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study involved selected teachers and principals from the three school classifications. The sample was organized according to school location, namely upland, coastal, and mainland schools. The manuscript identified the number of respondents per group but did not explicitly state the specific sampling technique used. The respondents were selected based on their involvement in schools implementing inclusive education and their capacity to provide information on learners with special needs, facilities, professional development, practices, and challenges.

2.5 Research Instrument

The study used a researcher-made survey questionnaire as the main data-gathering instrument. The questionnaire was aligned with the research objectives to ensure that the collected data directly corresponded to the variables of the study. It had three major parts. The first part gathered data on school profile, including the number of learners with special needs, the number of teachers handling these learners, available facilities, and professional development activities attended by teachers. The second part gathered information on the inclusive education practices implemented in upland, coastal, and mainland schools. The third part gathered data on the challenges encountered by the different school types in implementing inclusive education. The questionnaire was checked and validated by education and research experts, including specialists in inclusive education. Validation focused on content accuracy, sufficiency, and alignment of the items with the major research objectives. The instrument also underwent reliability testing through a pilot test or dry run involving a small group of teachers from another division not included in the study.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Before data collection, the researcher complied with administrative and ethical requirements. Approval was secured from school heads and from the district and division research committees in Albay. Formal request letters were sent to education leaders and authorities in the division. Letters were also sent to the teacher and principal respondents, and their informed consent was obtained before their participation. After securing the necessary approvals and consent, the researcher administered the survey questionnaires according to the objectives of the study. For the school profile, questionnaires were administered to the school principals. For inclusive education practices and challenges, questionnaires were administered to selected teachers and school principals from the upland, coastal, and mainland schools.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The gathered data were organized, computed, analyzed, and interpreted using appropriate statistical tools. Frequency count was used to determine the number of responses in specific categories, particularly in relation to professional development activities attended by the respondents. Weighted mean was used to assess the responses for the major indicators of the study. The five-point Likert scale was used to interpret the level of inclusive education practices and the degree of challenges encountered. For inclusive education practices, the scale ranged from Not Practiced to Very Much Practiced. For challenges in inclusive education, the scale ranged from Least a Challenge to Very Much a Challenge. The manuscript also presented comparative analysis using the Kruskal-Wallis H-test to determine significant differences in inclusive education practices and challenges among upland, coastal, and mainland schools.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical protocols before and during data collection. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and their informed consent was secured. The researcher also assured them that their identities and responses would be protected under the provisions of the Data Privacy Act. The respondents were informed of their rights to privacy and confidentiality, to ask questions or clarify concerns, to be informed about the survey outcomes, to refuse answering sensitive questions, and to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Profile of Schools in Relation to Inclusive Education

3.1.1 Type of School

Most of the respondents came from mainland schools, with 149 out of 253 participants or 58.9%. Coastal schools accounted for 57 respondents or 22.5%, while upland schools had the fewest respondents, with 47 or 18.6%. This shows that mainland schools were the most represented group in the study, followed by coastal and upland schools. This distribution suggests that mainland schools may have larger school populations and better accessibility compared with upland and coastal schools. Williams & Moore (2020) noted that schools in urban or mainland areas tend to have more students because of better access to educational resources, infrastructure, facilities, and support services. Coastal schools, although fewer in number, remain important in communities where local economic life is connected to maritime and coastal activities, which is consistent with Martinez and Garcia (2021). Meanwhile, the lower representation of upland schools reflects the challenges of distance, access, and limited school facilities, as similarly observed by Smith and Johnson (2018).

3.1.2 Number of Learners with Special Needs

The study recorded 126 learners with special needs across the three school locations. Mainland schools had the highest number, with 64 learners or 50.8%, followed by coastal schools with 37 learners or 29.4%, and upland schools with 25 learners or 19.8%. Intellectual Disabilities recorded the highest total frequency with 23 learners, followed by Learning Disabilities with 14, Physical Disabilities with 13, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) with 11. The lowest category was Others with 5 learners, while Chronic Health Conditions accounted for 7 learners. The results suggest

that mainland schools may have stronger access, enrollment, and identification mechanisms for learners with special needs. The high frequency of Intellectual Disabilities and Learning Disabilities indicates that these conditions are more commonly identified because they directly affect classroom participation and academic performance. The lower number in upland schools may not necessarily mean fewer learners with special needs, but may reflect smaller school populations, limited assessment services, or under-identification. This finding is supported by Sumayang et al. (2022), who found that mainstream teachers in the Philippines experienced challenges in handling learners with special educational needs due to limited preparation and resources. Allam et al. (2021) similarly reported difficulties among SPED teachers in relation to instructional support and specialized services. UNESCO (2020; 2021) also emphasized that children with disabilities often experience unequal access to schooling and support when inclusive systems and assessment services are limited.

3.1.3 Number of Teachers Handling Learners with Special Needs

The study identified 196 teachers handling learners with special needs. Mainland schools had the highest number with 93 teachers or 47.4%, followed by coastal schools with 60 teachers or 30.6%, and upland schools with 43 teachers or 21.9%. In terms of learner type, the highest number of teachers handled learners with Intellectual Disabilities, with 32 teachers in total, followed by Learning Disabilities with 26 teachers and Physical Disabilities with 22 teachers. The lowest number was recorded under Others, with only 7 teachers. These findings indicate that mainland schools may have better access to teaching personnel, resources, and support systems for learners with special needs. However, the lower number of teachers in upland schools may also reflect limited staffing and possible under-identification of learners who require support. Teacher preparedness remains a major factor in successful inclusive education. Kurteshi & Zymberi (2025) reported that 94.5% of urban teachers and 98.1% of rural teachers identified specialized training as their primary challenge. This suggests that the desire to implement inclusion may be present, but technical capacity remains insufficient. Related studies also show that well-designed training programs improve teacher self-efficacy and help educators adapt teaching strategies for diverse learners (Johnson et al., 2024; SH & Supriyono, 2024). Without compulsory inclusive education preparation, the gap between inclusive education policy and classroom practice may continue (Sharma, 2019).

3.1.4 Facilities Available for Inclusive Education

The availability of inclusive education facilities differed across the three school types. Mainland schools had the highest number of available facilities, with 8 out of 12 listed facilities or 66.7%. Coastal schools had 5 available facilities or 41.7%, while upland schools had only 3 available facilities or 25.0%. Mainland schools had facilities such as a Special Education classroom, large-print materials, wheelchairs, audio books or recorded lessons, and assistive learning technology. Upland schools had fewer facilities and were limited mainly to basic support such as rest rooms, ramps, and magnifying glasses. The results show a clear facility gap, with mainland schools being more equipped to support learners with special needs than coastal and upland schools. This suggests that access to inclusive education facilities is strongly affected by school location. Mainland schools appear to benefit from stronger infrastructure, while upland schools experience more severe limitations. This pattern reflects urban-centric resource allocation, where population density and centrality often influence special education service provision (Meijer & Jäger, 2001). Research also indicates that inclusion levels are higher in urbanized settings because of the availability of specialized assistants and resources, while rural schools often experience service limitations due to distance and geographic barriers (Kurteshi & Zymberi, 2025; Narayan & Patnaik, 2018). These findings imply the need for targeted investment in upland and coastal schools to improve facilities, assistive technologies, and learning materials.

3.1.5 Professional Development of Teachers

The results showed that out of 253 teachers, only 67 or 26.5% had received formal professional development related to inclusive education, while 186 or 73.5% had not received such training. Among upland teachers, 72.3% had no training; among coastal teachers, 70.2% had no training; and among mainland teachers, 75.2% had no training. Seminars and workshops were the most common form of professional development, attended by 35 teachers. In-service training programs were attended by 24 teachers, while only 3 teachers had graduate studies or inclusive education units, all from mainland schools. The findings show that many teachers are expected to support learners with special needs without sufficient formal preparation. This reflects a system-wide professional development gap that affects all school types. Kurteshi & Zymberi (2025) similarly reported specialized training as a major challenge among rural teachers. The lack of compulsory inclusive education preparation contributes to teachers feeling unprepared in handling learner diversity (SH & Supriyono, 2024; Sharma, 2019). Although mainland schools appear stronger in facilities, the high number of untrained teachers shows that infrastructure alone is not enough. Teachers also need professional empowerment, pedagogical training, and sustained support. Studies emphasize that lack of resources and professional preparation can limit teachers' capacity to implement inclusive education effectively (Magotra & Vidya, 2024; Narayan & Patnaik, 2018). Digital tools and pedagogical training can help transform teachers from unsupported implementers into capable mentors for diverse learners (Kheng & Rusli, 2025; Magotra & Vidya, 2024).

3.2 Inclusive Education Practices Across School Locations

3.2.1 Comparative Level of Inclusive Education Practices

The results showed that mainland schools had the highest composite mean of 4.05, interpreted as Much Practiced. Coastal schools obtained a composite mean of 3.31, interpreted as Moderately Practiced, while upland schools obtained the lowest composite mean of 2.33, interpreted as Slightly Practiced. Mainland schools showed particularly strong results in differentiated instruction, with a mean of 4.80, and school leadership support, with a mean of 4.47, both interpreted as Very Much Practiced. In contrast, upland schools had lower ratings in differentiated instruction and school leadership support, with means of 3.04 and 2.87, respectively. These results indicate that inclusive education practices were most evident in mainland schools and least evident in upland schools. This may be explained by the stronger access of mainland schools to administrative support, facilities, training opportunities, and specialized services. Kurteshi & Zymberi (2025) noted that inclusion levels are generally higher in urbanized settings because of better support and facilities. Strong leadership and administrative support are also important in translating inclusive education policy into actual classroom practice (Miranda & Dewanti, 2024; SH & Supriyono, 2024). The low rating of upland schools suggests that inclusive education remains limited in more remote areas and requires stronger administrative and instructional support.

3.2.2 Gaps in Professional Development, Collaboration, and Resources

The data further showed that upland schools had the weakest results in professional development and collaboration between regular and SPED teachers. Professional development in upland schools obtained a mean of 1.74, while collaboration between regular and SPED teachers obtained a mean of 1.52, both interpreted as Not Practiced. Upland schools also had low ratings for classroom adaptations, assessment modification, accessible learning materials, and inclusive school policy implementation. Mainland schools had higher ratings in these areas, with professional development interpreted as Much Practiced and collaboration interpreted as Moderately Practiced. These findings suggest that upland teachers experience professional isolation because distance and limited resources restrict their access to training, collaboration, and support services. This aligns with Kurteshi & Zymberi (2025), who reported that 98.1% of rural teachers identified lack of specialized training as a major obstacle. Mabasa-Manganyi (2023) also noted that teachers may feel overburdened by inclusive education requirements when adequate support is lacking. The lack of accessible materials and specialized services in rural settings may create service-poor environments that prevent inclusive theories from becoming classroom practice (Magotra & Vidya, 2024; Narayan & Patnaik, 2018). These results imply that upland schools need decentralized training, mentoring, collaboration mechanisms, and mobile resource support to strengthen inclusive education practices.

3.3 Challenges in the Implementation of Inclusive Education

3.3.1 Comparative Level of Challenges

The findings showed that upland schools experienced the greatest challenges, with a composite mean of 4.25, interpreted as Very Much a Challenge. Coastal schools obtained a composite mean of 3.42, interpreted as Much a Challenge, while mainland schools obtained 3.30, interpreted as Moderate Challenge. In upland schools, the most serious challenges were lack of adequate facilities and assistive technologies, with a mean of 4.89; lack of budget or financial support, with a mean of 4.80; and inadequate classrooms or learning spaces, with a mean of 4.71. These findings show that the severity of inclusive education challenges increases in more remote school settings. Upland schools appear to experience a geographic penalty, where physical distance, limited funding, and insufficient facilities make inclusive education more difficult to implement. This result is consistent with Kurteshi & Zymberi (2025), who found that rural schools face shortages in support assistants and critical resources. Geographic distance and low population density also limit the delivery of special education services in rural areas (Meijer & Jäger, 2001; Narayan & Patnaik, 2018). The findings therefore point to the need for an equity-first funding approach that prioritizes accessible learning spaces, assistive technologies, and facility improvement in upland schools.

3.3.2 Structural and Personnel-Related Challenges

The data also showed that upland schools experienced serious administrative and personnel-related challenges, particularly limited collaboration between regular and SPED teachers, with a mean of 4.39, and high workload and time constraints, with a mean of 4.28, both interpreted as Very Much a Challenge. Negative attitudes or misconceptions about learners with special needs were rated only as a Moderate Challenge in upland schools and as a Less Challenge in mainland schools. These results suggest that the primary barriers to inclusive education are structural rather than attitudinal. Teachers may be willing to support inclusion, but they are constrained by lack of facilities, funding, collaboration, time, and specialized assistance. This condition may create systemic exhaustion among teachers who handle diverse learners without adequate institutional support. The findings reinforce the need for additional personnel, collaborative structures, workload management, and professional support systems so that inclusive education can be implemented more effectively across school contexts.

3.4 Significant Differences Among Upland, Coastal, and Mainland Schools

3.4.1 Difference in Inclusive Education Practices

The Kruskal-Wallis H-Test showed a significant difference in inclusive education practices among the three types of schools. Mainland schools recorded the highest mean rank of 1810.82, followed by coastal schools with 1280.21, and upland schools with 693.06. The test result for inclusive education practices was significant, with $H = 814.573$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$. The result confirms that inclusive education practices are not uniformly implemented across school locations. Mainland schools appear to have a geographical advantage because of better access to administrative oversight, facilities, specialized services, and professional development opportunities. This finding is consistent with studies showing that inclusion levels tend to be higher in central or urbanized settings due to stronger administrative and facility support (Kurteshi & Zymberi, 2025; Miranda & Dewanti, 2024). The result implies that inclusive education in the division is affected by geography and resource distribution, making it necessary to standardize instructional quality and inclusive support across remote and central schools.

3.4.2 Difference in Inclusive Education Challenges

The Kruskal-Wallis H-Test also showed a significant difference in the challenges encountered in inclusive education. Upland schools recorded the highest mean rank of 2093.55, followed by coastal schools with 1425.47, and mainland schools with 1330.12. The test result for challenges was also significant, with $H = 364.302$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$. This finding indicates that challenges in inclusive education vary significantly by school location. Upland schools experience the greatest burden, suggesting that remoteness intensifies problems related to budget, facilities, professional isolation, workload, and support services. This supports earlier findings that rural teachers experience specialized training gaps, high travel costs, and limited resources, which may leave them overburdened in handling diverse learners (Kurteshi & Zymberi, 2025; Magotra & Vidya, 2024; Narayan & Patnaik, 2018). The significant result led to the rejection of the null hypothesis and confirms that a uniform administrative approach is insufficient for addressing the different realities of upland, coastal, and mainland schools.

3.5 Proposed Action Plan Based on the Findings

The study developed an action plan based on the identified school profiles, inclusive education practices, implementation challenges, and the similarities and differences among upland, coastal, and mainland schools. The plan was intended to strengthen inclusive education across diverse school environments by addressing gaps in facilities, resources, teacher preparation, and support services. The proposed action plan recognizes that each school location requires a different form of intervention. For upland schools, the plan focuses on improving inclusive facilities, assistive technologies, instructional materials, and support systems for teachers and learners. For coastal schools, the plan emphasizes teacher training, seminars, capacity-building, and continuous professional development in inclusive education. For mainland schools, the plan focuses on sustaining existing inclusive practices through continuous improvement, regular monitoring, and further enhancement of facilities and assistive devices. This location-responsive approach reflects the study's finding that inclusive education implementation is shaped by school context and that each school type requires targeted support.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concludes that inclusive education implementation varies significantly across upland, coastal, and mainland schools in Albay. Mainland schools recorded the highest number of learners with special needs, teachers, and available inclusive education facilities, while upland schools had the least resources and experienced the greatest gaps in facilities, teacher support, professional development, assistive technologies, budget, and classroom spaces. Inclusive education practices were most evident in mainland schools and least practiced in upland schools, confirming that school location greatly affects both the practice of inclusive education and the challenges encountered. The significant differences in practices and challenges indicate that remote schools carry a heavier implementation burden, making a targeted action plan necessary to address the specific needs of each school type.

It is recommended that greater funding and support be directed to upland schools to improve facilities, provide specialized teachers, establish SPED classrooms, and supply assistive technologies. Upland schools should also be supported through specialized teacher training focused on differentiated instruction and the use of assistive technologies. Since the needs of upland, coastal, and mainland schools differ, interventions should be location-specific: upland schools should prioritize infrastructure and resources, coastal schools should strengthen teacher training, and mainland schools should sustain and improve existing inclusive practices. The proposed action plan should focus on facility improvement, assistive technology provision, adequate funding, continuous professional development, regular monitoring, and stakeholder involvement, including support from local government units and NGOs.

The study was limited to the comparative survey of inclusive education practices in upland, coastal, and mainland schools in Albay, with selected school heads and teachers as respondents during academic year 2026. Its scope was confined to identifying school profiles in terms of learners with special needs, teachers handling them, facilities, and teacher

professional development; determining practices and challenges in inclusive education implementation; comparing similarities and differences among the three school types; and developing an action plan based on the findings.

Compliance with ethical standards

The study adhered to institutional ethical standards by securing the necessary approvals from school heads and research authorities before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from the teacher and school head respondents. Confidentiality and data privacy were observed in accordance with the Data Privacy Act, and respondents were informed of their rights to ask questions, refuse to answer sensitive items, and withdraw from the study at any time. The author acknowledges the contributions of the adviser, statistician, panel members, and respondents, declares responsibility for the integrity of the work, and affirms that no conflict of interest was reported, with copyright ownership retained by the author subject to applicable institutional and publication policies.

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