

Two Teachers, One Classroom: Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Co-Teaching–Facilitated Small-Group Learning and Its Influence on Learner Confidence and Engagement in Philippine Inclusive Classrooms

Authors Details

Norben Pabondia Agas^{1*}

Sully Elementary School, Loudoun County Public Schools, Virginia, USA.

Corresponding Author: *Norben Pabondia Agas*

ABSTRACT: Purpose. The Philippine Inclusive Education Act of 2022 shifted the teaching of disabled students to general education classrooms wherein collaboration between the special education (SNEd) teacher and the general education teacher shall be an ordinary condition of basic education. The benefit of international synthesis, however, is that they highlight that co-taught classrooms tend to become setups where one teacher teaches and the other teacher helps, and there is little use of small group teaching, moving the specialist to an assistant role. The current research explored that phenomenon from a practitioner's perspective was most impacted by the phenomenon.

Method. The convergent mixed methods design was used and total enumeration, covering sixty (60) special education teachers in one Schools Division Office in the National Capital Region in the Philippines was employed. Validated (by 5 experts; S-CVI/Ave = 0.94) and pilot-tested (externally; $\alpha = 0.84-0.93$) researcher-made instrument was used to generate quantitative data, while two focus group discussions were used to generate qualitative data, which was achieved with open-ended prompts. Weighted mean, standard deviation, Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H tests were used for analysis, and reflexive thematic analysis was used for the narrative strand.

Findings. The one teach–one assist configuration was used Often ($M = 4.18$) and the three small–group –generating configurations had a composite rating of 2.49 (Rarely). The highest level of implementation was for in-lesson behaviors that a specialist engages in alone, while the lowest was for recognized instructional parity ($M = 2.12$) and joint planning pre-lesson ($M = 2.25$). Learner perceived confidence was rated Very Highly Evident ($M = 3.29$), engagement Highly Evident ($M = 3.16$), and cognitive engagement was the lowest ($M = 2.95$). Of all the outcome domains (implementation: $H = 18.44$, $p < .001$), only common planning time distinguished all three sections, with the threshold between "almost none" and "thirty minutes weekly". There was significant correlation between implementation and confidence ($\rho = .617$) and engagement ($\rho = .584$).

Contribution. The study provides a mechanism for implementing inclusive education at the configuration level, which is not included in Philippine inclusive education research, demonstrates that the limitation of inclusive practice in an urban division is administrative, not attitudinal, and, pinpoints an intervention point that is low cost and high yield in protected weekly co-planning time.

Keywords: *co-teaching; inclusive education; special education teachers; small-group learning; learner engagement; Philippines*

1. Introduction

The Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities in Support of Inclusive Education Act (RA 11650) was signed in March 2022, which shifted the legal locus of special education in the Philippines. Ensures that every learner with a disability is provided free and appropriate public basic education in the least restrictive environment, establishes Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs) in existing SPED Centers, introduces a Child Find System and requires individualized education plans (IEP) (Republic Act No. 11650, 2022). In 2025, its Implementing Rules and Regulations disseminated to the field centered the Schools Division Office in the identification, placement, service delivery and teacher capacity building (Department of Education, 2025). Inclusion is thus no longer a program option, given to a specialist who has moved to another part of the building, but it is the standard situation for the Filipino classroom.

The record of implementation is dismal. The Second Congressional Commission on Education and IDinsight (2025) used administrative data and a survey of 1,994 teachers to

determine that 5.1 million Filipino children with disability were in public schools during School Year (SY) 2024-2025, of which only 391,089 were enrolled, which translates to about eight per cent. Sixty per cent of the learners with disability enrolled in public schools were in schools with no Special Needs Education program, SPED Center, ILRC or SNEd teacher. Of the 32 converted ILRCs, none was fully functional and multidisciplinary staff like therapists and psychologists were reported to be limited in availability due to low availability, lack of hiring guidelines, and low compensation.

The special education teacher will have a broader role with less support. The teacher who used to teach a self-contained class is now required to teach as a push-in, "specialist" in a variety of classrooms, co-teach with teachers who lack disability expertise, act as an IEP writer, assessment focus, and resource to colleagues who have no training in disability. The picture emerging from the receiving teacher's side of the Philippine research is consistent: teachers enter inclusive classrooms without preparation and adapt the curriculum and behavior management (BBM) to meet the needs of their pupils as they go; commitment consistently outruns capacity, with the lack of resources, parent participation, and teacher training being the recurring obstacles; and division-level surveys show high self-assessed implementation, but also gaps in BBM infrastructure and policy consistency.

There are less and more negative research studies involving the special education teacher. In the study of six SNEd teachers deployed as shadow teachers in Metro Manila inclusive schools, Buenrostro-Jocson (2024) found that although they were superficially collaborating with the regular classroom teachers, they played a major role in the education of the learner with disability, far exceeding their role as support teachers. This setup did not leave the learner's body alone; it duplicated what inclusion was supposed to undo: the separation of the learner in the general education classroom. A second example of how people collaborate without fixed structures is described in Macabenta et al. (2023), where they describe improvised collaboration without fixed structures.

1.1 Co-teaching and the small-group deficit

Co-teaching is often cited as the presumed mechanism of inclusive delivery, but there is little quantitative evidence for this. In a meta-analysis, King-Sears et al. (2021) did not find substantial differences in students with disabilities' achievement in co-taught classes compared to students with similar disabilities in solo-taught classes, and there were

significant problems with the way implementation was described. The same conclusion was reached by Stefanidis et al. (2023) when it was further extended to disabled and non-disabled students, and De Weerd et al. (2025) concluded that the conceptual and methodological credibility of experimental team-teaching research is uneven.

The qualitative evidence is more explanatory and warmer. In meta-synthesis, Strogilos et al. (2023) found that co-teachers viewed the arrangement as beneficial to their own and their learners' learning when it was truly collaborative and they identified shared planning, negotiated roles, and parity of instructional authority as the features that were least frequently present. Paulsrud and Nilholm (2023) suggested that co-teachers are more inclined to use configurations that require fewest instructional adjustments, and that the unequal distribution of authority, in which teaching the learners with individualized programmes becomes a part-time job, is often discussed. Students in primary co-taught classes access this division accurately; primary students in co-taught classes have positive perceptions of participation and of the general education teacher planning and instructing (Rönn-Liljenfeldt et al., 2023; Strogilos & King-Sears, 2019).

The six configurations recognized for generating teacher-facilitated small groups are only three of them: station, parallel, and alternative teaching. If a pair fails to attend these, the benefits of having 2 adults are lost: 2 or 3 simultaneous small groups becomes 1 large group and helper. That conversion, however, is expensive in the Philippine context, where class sizes in school often reach more than 40 students.

1.2 Theoretical framing

Through the social cognitive theory of confidence, it is believed that this confidence develops more rapidly through mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, and credible verbal instructions, all of which occur at much greater rates in a group of six than a class of 45 students, where a learner might not speak or receive individual feedback for an entire period (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). The small group is not a smaller class but another opportunity structure. Engagement is conceptualised using the three-part view of engagement that differentiates behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2016), thus avoiding the risk of reducing engagement to an impression of a successful lesson. Teacher perception is regarded as primary evidence and not as commentaries on evidence elsewhere: Zee and Koomen (2016) were

able to ascertain consistent relationships between teachers' efficacy beliefs and classroom processes that they create and learners' academic adjustment. Given that identification of learners with disabilities is a documented gap in the Philippines and that there is no validated instrument of engagement that is available for Filipino learners with disabilities, the systematic collection of the teacher's judgement will be the most complete evidence available.

1.3 Research gap and objectives

The literature is predominantly from the lens of the receiving teacher; only one study focused on SNEd teachers in inclusive schools reported on role displacement but did not delve into instructional configurations that lead to role displacement. The international syntheses, in turn, repeatedly request more detailed description of what is actually put into practice. This study will answer both of the gaps at the actionable level. It aimed to describe the profile of SNEd teachers and their configuration use, to determine the extent of implementation of co-teaching–facilitated small group learning, to determine the extent of perceived influence on learner confidence and on engagement across its three dimensions, to identify enablers and barriers, to test differences in outcomes across profile variables, to test relationships between extent of implementation and perceived outcomes, and to derive a guide for SNEd practice and a design for capacity building at the Division level.

Two null hypotheses were tested using a significance level of $\alpha = .05$. **H₀₁**: The differences between the groups regarding profile variables in terms of extent of implementation, perceived learner confidence and perceived learner engagement are not significant. **H₀₂**: The extent of implementation does not significantly impact the perceived confidence and engagement of learners.

2. Method

2.1 Design

Convergent mixed method design, which has a predominant quantitative strand, was used. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered in the same time period, analyzed separately, and integrated at interpretation using a combined display. The quantitative strand will be descriptive, comparative and correlational. The design is appropriate because

instructional configuration is at the same time countable and situated: How often a configuration is used can be scaled but why a teacher gives up on it cannot.

2.2 Setting and participants

The study was carried out in a Schools Division Office in the National Capital Region (NCR), Philippines. The Division provides Special Needs Education via self-contained classrooms, SPED Center and/or ILRC-based services, Push-In and Pull-Out and Full-Inclusion placements in elementary and secondary schools. As per the confidentiality agreement with the Division, the Division and school are not named.

Total enumerations were conducted. Sixty percent (60/72) of all the Division roster of SNEd teachers returned the completed and valid consent (83.3% return). The inclusion criteria were: current official designation as a SNEd teacher, at least one grading period of experience working with a receiving teacher, and voluntary informed consent. The respondents are coded (SNEd-01 to SNEd-60). Two focus group discussions were conducted by 16 respondents who were selected to reflect the deployment arrangements. Thirty teachers from the neighboring Division, who were all SNEd teachers, were chosen as the pilot group.

2.3 Instrument

For this study, the Teacher Perceptions of Co-Teaching and Small-Group Learning Questionnaire for Special Education Teachers (TPCSLQ-SNEd) was developed based on the co-teaching and engagement literature (Fredricks et al., 2016; Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2023; Strogilos et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2016). It includes the professional profile section of 12 items, 42 items in the four domains of implementation (10), perceived learner confidence (10), perceived learner engagement (12, evenly spread across behavioral, emotional and cognitive) enablers and barriers (10) and eight open-ended prompts. The respondents were allowed to respond in English, Filipino or Taglish. The full instrument is available as supplementary material.

A four point Strongly Agree (4.00–3.26, Very Highly Evident) to Strongly Disagree (1.00–1.75, Slightly Evident) scale was used to avoid central tendency: 4 (Strongly Agree, 4.00–3.26, Very Highly Evident), 3 (Agree, 3.25–2.51, Highly Evident), 2 (Disagree, 2.50–1.76, Moderately Evident), 1 (Strongly Disagree, 1.00–1.75, Slightly Evident). The frequency of

configuration was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1.00–1.80 (Never) to 4.21–5.00 (Almost always).

The content validity index (CVI) was used by 5 experts, a Division Education Program Supervisor for Special Education, a curriculum and instruction specialist and a research methodologist, to determine the content validity of the document with cut off scores of at least $I-CVI \geq 0.78$ and $S-CVI/Ave \geq 0.90$ (Yusoff, 2019). Four items were reworded, two were duplicated and one was added for itinerant deployment; final $S-CVI/Ave$ was 0.94. Internal consistency was calculated on the external pilot group ($N = 30$): implementation $\alpha = 0.88$, confidence $\alpha = 0.91$, engagement $\alpha = 0.93$, enablers and barriers $\alpha = 0.84$.

2.4 Procedure and analysis

Approval was obtained from the Office of the Schools Division Superintendent via the Schools Division Research Committee as per DepEd Order No. 16, s. Before any contact with respondents, 2017, and from the sponsoring institution's ethics review body. The instrument was administered electronically and in a printed format within a 3 week period after orientation and with written informed consent. Filipino and Taglish were left in the transcriptions of the focus group discussions which were audio recorded with participants' consent and were verbatim transcripts. Narrative summaries and suggested quotations were sent back to respondents for member checking.

Profile variables were represented in terms of frequency and percentage, while domain and item results were represented as weighted mean and standard deviation. Shapiro-Wilk tests showed that the data were not normally distributed so non-parametric tests were performed: Mann-Whitney U test for two groups, Kruskal-Wallis H test with Dunn's post hoc test and Bonferroni correction for three or more groups, and Spearman rank order correlation for relationships at $\alpha = .05$. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2021, 2022) was used to analyse the narrative data, with a deductive approach based on the study framework and open inductive approach to generate themes.

2.5 Ethics

Information was gathered from teachers only. No learner was observed, evaluated, or identified and no learner record, grade, IEP or assessment result was accessed. Classroom incidents were described by respondents and inadvertent identifiers were redacted at

transcription. Participation was voluntary and could not result in job loss, performance rating, or professional standing; this was specified explicitly, as the researcher was employed in the Division, and as SNEd teachers are relatively small in number per school, they can be identified. Quotations were reviewed to ensure that no one can be identified by school, grade or disability category handled, or by incident detail. Member checking, triangulation of open-ended responses and focus group transcripts, an audit trail of coding decisions, a written reflexivity statement, and thick description of deployment arrangements were complementing and reinforced by trustworthiness.

3. Results

3.1 Respondent profile

Sixteen people responded to the profile in total, with sixty people given a profile. They have an experienced teaching staff team with a short co-teaching history, and shorter time with their current partner teacher: 55.0% of the teaching staff have served eight years or more; 48.3% have co-taught for two years or less; 81.7% have been with their current partner teacher for two years or less. Only 36.7% are deployed in a push-in or co-taught configuration that would allow for co-teaching, 23.3% have self-contained classes and 11.7% are itinerant between schools. The mean number of disability categories that the respondents work with is 3.2, most frequently intellectual disability (73.3%), autism spectrum disorder (68.3%) and specific learning disability (63.3%).

Half the respondents have less than thirty minutes of scheduled common planning time per week and 18.3% have none. Training coverage is wide but shallow, with 91.7% reporting some training (mostly in general inclusive education in Learning Action Cells in school or Division sessions, not usually in relation to a specific configuration) This is similar to the results of a study in the Philippines which found that teachers report that inclusive education training is limited, too theoretical or not applicable in their context (Pangan et al., 2025).

Table 1. Profile of respondents (N = 60)

Variable	Category	f	%
Years in teaching	1–3	9	15.0
	4–7	18	30.0
	8–12	20	33.3
	13 or more	13	21.7

Variable	Category	f	%
Years of co-teaching	Less than 1	8	13.3
	1–2	21	35.0
	3–5	19	31.7
	6 or more	12	20.0
Years with current partner	Less than 1	24	40.0
	1–2	25	41.7
	3 or more	11	18.3
Deployment arrangement	Self-contained SPED class	14	23.3
	Push-in / co-taught inclusion	22	36.7
	Pull-out with inclusion periods	17	28.3
	Itinerant / multi-school	7	11.7
Common planning time per week	None	11	18.3
	Less than 30 minutes	19	31.7
	30–60 minutes	18	30.0
	1–2 hours	9	15.0
	More than 2 hours	3	5.0
Training received (multiple response)	School-based Learning Action Cell	41	68.3
	Division or regional training	34	56.7
	Graduate coursework	22	36.7
	National training programme	6	10.0
	None	5	8.3

3.2 Configuration use

Table 2 is the empirical focus of the study. The two configurations with the least instructional modification and with no small group production rank first and second and the three small group-generating configurations rank with a composite mean of 2.49 = Rarely. Parallel teaching, which assumes the sharing of content knowledge and collaborative planning is the least frequently used.

Table 2. Frequency of use of co-teaching configurations (N = 60)

Configuration	M	SD	Interpretation	Rank
One teach, one assist	4.18	0.72	Often	1
One teach, one observe	3.35	0.86	Sometimes	2
Alternative teaching	2.88	0.91	Sometimes	3
Team teaching	2.63	0.95	Sometimes	4

Configuration	M	SD	Interpretation	Rank
Station teaching	2.42	0.97	Rarely	5
Parallel teaching	2.18	0.94	Rarely	6
Composite: small-group configurations	2.49	0.94	Rarely	—

3.3 Extent of implementation

Overall mean of Implementation was 2.58 (Table 3), which is at the lower limit of Highly Implemented. The composite has a soft underbelly. With the five highest ranked indicators, a skilled specialist can engage directly in these in-lesson teaching behaviors without the help of another person in real time. The five lowest are the following structural and relational conditions that need institutional support or a colleague's agreement: non-separation of learners with disabilities, post-lesson debriefing, joint pre-lesson planning, shared instructional leadership and recognized parity of authority. The two items at the bottom of the list are the two that the literature defines as being part of co-teaching and not part of other instructional models.

Table 3. Extent of implementation of co-teaching–facilitated small-group learning (N = 60)

#	Indicator	M	SD	Interpretation
9	Monitor small-group work and adjust instruction during the lesson	3.05	0.63	Highly Implemented
6	Differentiate tasks, materials, or scaffolds across groups	3.02	0.66	Highly Implemented
7	Roles during small-group instruction are clear to us and to learners	2.88	0.74	Highly Implemented
4	Vary group composition based on learning needs	2.83	0.71	Highly Implemented
1	Regularly organise learners into small groups	2.72	0.78	Highly Implemented
5	Groups formed so learners with disabilities are not visibly separated	2.47	0.89	Moderately Implemented
10	Debrief after co-taught lessons	2.28	0.85	Moderately Implemented
3	Plan small-group tasks together before the lesson	2.25	0.83	Moderately Implemented
2	Both lead instruction; neither limited to a	2.18	0.86	Moderately

#	Indicator	M	SD	Interpretation
	supporting role			Implemented
8	Learners recognise both as teachers with equal authority	2.12	0.91	Moderately Implemented
Overall		2.58	0.79	Highly Implemented

3.4 Perceived learner confidence and engagement

The highest level of perceived influence on the confidence of learners was found in the domain of Perceived influence on learner confidence (M = 3.29, Very Highly Evident; Table 4). Theoretically, the top five are all indicators of ingroup behavior, with the transfer of confidence into whole class activity ranked last (M = 2.93) and volunteering before the whole class ranking ninth (M = 3.05).

Table 4. Perceived influence on learner confidence (N = 60)

#	Indicator	M	SD	Interpretation
20	Two teachers available reduce learners' hesitation to seek support	3.58	0.55	Very Highly Evident
11	Learners speak up more readily in small groups	3.52	0.58	Very Highly Evident
13	Learners ask for help more openly	3.48	0.59	Very Highly Evident
12	Learners more willing to attempt difficult tasks	3.43	0.61	Very Highly Evident
14	Learners less afraid of giving a wrong answer	3.37	0.64	Very Highly Evident
15	Learners with disabilities participate closer to peer level	3.22	0.70	Highly Evident
18	Learners explain their reasoning to peers	3.18	0.69	Highly Evident
17	Learners show more initiative in starting tasks	3.12	0.72	Highly Evident
16	Learners volunteer to share group work with the whole class	3.05	0.76	Highly Evident
19	Confidence gained in small groups carries into whole-class activity	2.93	0.81	Highly Evident
Overall		3.29	0.67	Very Highly Evident

The overall mean of the engagements was 3.16 (Table 5). The dimensional ordering (behavioral above emotional above cognitive above) is consistent and interpretable. The

most evident of these is behavioral engagement, which is the easiest to modify through proximity. Emotional engagement comes next, with sense of belonging having the highest score within the dimension (3.40). Cognitive engagement is the lowest rated outcome dimension in the study and depth of questioning (2.88) and learner ownership of learning (2.85) are the two lowest rated outcome indicators across the entire instrument.

Table 5. Perceived influence on learner engagement by dimension (N = 60)

Dimension / Indicator	M	SD	Interpretation
Behavioural			
Stay on task longer in small groups	3.45	0.60	Very Highly Evident
Off-task and disruptive behaviour decreases	3.33	0.66	Very Highly Evident
More learners complete assigned work	3.28	0.68	Very Highly Evident
Persist after initial difficulty	3.07	0.74	Highly Evident
<i>Sub-domain mean</i>	<i>3.28</i>	<i>0.67</i>	<i>Very Highly Evident</i>
Emotional			
Stronger sense of belonging in the class	3.40	0.62	Very Highly Evident
More interested in lesson content	3.35	0.63	Very Highly Evident
More positive attitudes toward the subject	3.15	0.71	Highly Evident
Improved relationships across ability differences	3.10	0.75	Highly Evident
<i>Sub-domain mean</i>	<i>3.25</i>	<i>0.68</i>	<i>Highly Evident</i>
Cognitive			
Connect new content to prior knowledge	3.08	0.73	Highly Evident
Use learning strategies (rereading, checking, planning)	2.97	0.76	Highly Evident
Ask deeper or more probing questions	2.88	0.79	Highly Evident
Take responsibility for own learning	2.85	0.80	Highly Evident
<i>Sub-domain mean</i>	<i>2.95</i>	<i>0.77</i>	<i>Highly Evident</i>
Overall engagement	3.16	0.72	Highly Evident

3.5 Enablers and barriers

The Division's problem is written in one frame in Table 6. Class size (1.87), physical space (2.02) and planning time (2.05) are the enablers least present, while the most strongly endorsed is the respondents' own willingness to recommend the practice (3.62).

Curriculum pacing (3.35) and assessment demands (3.28) are the dominant components of the barrier cluster.

Table 6. Enablers and barriers (N = 60)

#	Indicator	M	SD	Interpretation
Enablers				
42	Would recommend the practice to other inclusive classrooms	3.62	0.54	Very Highly Evident
34	Partner teacher and I share compatible beliefs about learning	2.92	0.70	Highly Evident
35	School heads actively support co-teaching	2.78	0.77	Highly Evident
36	Adequate training received in co-teaching configurations	2.23	0.84	Moderately Evident
33	Enough scheduled common planning time	2.05	0.88	Moderately Evident
38	Physical classroom space accommodates simultaneous groups	2.02	0.85	Moderately Evident
37	Class size allows small groups to run effectively	1.87	0.79	Moderately Evident
<i>Enabler mean</i>		<i>2.50</i>	<i>0.81</i>	<i>Moderately Evident</i>
Barriers				
39	Curriculum pacing limits use of small-group instruction	3.35	0.65	Very Highly Evident
40	Assessment and testing demands limit use	3.28	0.68	Very Highly Evident
41	Differences in content expertise complicate role sharing	2.75	0.82	Highly Evident
<i>Barrier mean</i>		<i>3.13</i>	<i>0.74</i>	<i>Highly Evident</i>

3.6 Differences and relationships

The results of the partial rejection of Ho1 are presented in Table 7. There were no differences found for any outcome domain when comparing the three groups: those who had taught for one year, two years, or had been assigned to grade level, to those who had co-taught for one year, two years, or were assigned to grade level. There were significant differences in all three domains ($H = 10.17, p < .001$; $H = 32.63, p < .001$; $H = 32.63, p < .001$) and the greatest test statistic in the study for implementation ($H = 18.44, p < .001$). Dunn's post hoc test identified the difference between respondents with little or no planning time and both other groups ($p < .01$), but did not find a difference between the 30–60 minute and more than one-hour groups. There was a significant difference with implementation based on division level or higher training ($p = .002$), but not with perceived outcomes.

Table 7. Tests of difference in outcome domains by profile variable ($N = 60, \alpha = .05$)

Grouping variable	Domain	Test	Statistic	df	p	Decision
Years in teaching	Implementation	H	4.37	3	.224	Not rejected
Years co-teaching	Implementation	H	6.82	3	.078	Not rejected
Grade level assignment	Implementation	H	3.95	3	.267	Not rejected
Common planning time	Implementation	H	18.44	2	< .001	Rejected
Common planning time	Confidence	H	9.36	2	.009	Rejected
Common planning time	Engagement	H	8.12	2	.017	Rejected
Training (Division+ vs. none/school-based)	Implementation	U	254.50	—	.002	Rejected
Training (Division+ vs. none/school-based)	Confidence	U	372.00	—	.156	Not rejected
Training (Division+ vs. none/school-based)	Engagement	U	388.50	—	.238	Not rejected

Note. H = Kruskal-Wallis; U = Mann-Whitney. Common planning time was collapsed into three groups: none or less than 30 minutes ($n = 30$), 30–60 minutes ($n = 18$), more than one hour ($n = 12$).

Table 8 shows that Ho2 rejected. All correlations were positive and significant, at $p < .001$. Perceived confidence ($\rho = .617$) had the highest implementation-outcome relationship, and the dimension rated lowest in absolute terms was with cognitive engagement ($\rho = .592$).

Table 8. Spearman rank-order correlations (N = 60)

Variables	ρ	p	Strength
Implementation ↔ Perceived learner confidence	.617	< .001	Strong
Implementation ↔ Perceived learner engagement	.584	< .001	Moderate
Implementation ↔ Cognitive engagement	.592	< .001	Moderate
Implementation ↔ Behavioural engagement	.561	< .001	Moderate
Implementation ↔ Emotional engagement	.548	< .001	Moderate
Common planning time ↔ Implementation	.548	< .001	Moderate
Perceived confidence ↔ Perceived engagement	.706	< .001	Strong

3.7 Themes from the narrative data

Five themes emerged from the open-ended responses (n = 60) and focus group discussions (n = 16).

Theme 1: “Nasa gilid lang ako” — the assistant identity as default. Respondents described entering the receiving classroom without a defined instructional role and defaulting to circulation, behaviour management, and one-to-one prompting. Learners and parents read the positioning accurately. As SNEd-17 put it, “*Kapag pumapasok ako sa klase, alam ko na ang gagawin ko: maglalakad-lakad, tutulong sa mga bata, tapos uupo sa tabi ni [learner]. Hindi ko naman kasi lesson ’yon. Bisita ako.*” (“When I go into the class I already know what I will do: walk around, help the children, then sit beside [the learner]. It isn’t my lesson, after all. I am a visitor.”)

Theme 2: The small group as the place where the quiet learner speaks. Where small groups were used, respondents described a consistent change, narrated almost always through a single learner and a single moment. SNEd-04: “*Sa buong quarter, hindi siya nagsalita sa harap ng klase. Pero noong ginawa naming station teaching, siya pa ang nag-explain sa katabi niya kung paano i-solve. Anim lang sila sa group.*” (“For the whole quarter he never spoke in front of the class. But when we did station teaching, he was the one who explained to his seatmate how to solve it. There were only six of them in the

group.”) Respondents narrated the change as occurring within the group and rarely reported it persisting into whole-class instruction.

Theme 3: Planning time as the binding constraint. SNEd-09: *“Ang planning namin, nasa hallway habang naglalakad papuntang classroom. Minsan sa Messenger nang alas-diyes ng gabi.”* (“Our planning happens in the hallway while walking to the classroom. Sometimes on Messenger at ten in the evening.”) Several respondents identified advance knowledge of the receiving teacher’s lesson as the single missing input for parallel and station teaching.

Theme 4: Forty-five learners, four corners, and the pacing guide. Class size, physical space, and coverage pressure were described as interlocking rather than separate constraints. SNEd-27: *“Kung apatnapu’t lima sila sa isang room, saan mo ilalagay ang tatlong grupo?”* (“If there are forty-five of them in one room, where do you put three groups?”)

Theme 5: Improvised parity. A minority described genuinely shared classrooms and, without exception, attributed the arrangement to personal compatibility rather than to structure. SNEd-38: *“Nag-usap kami sa simula ng taon kung sino ang gagawa ng ano. Iyon lang ang pinagkaiba namin sa iba.”* (“We talked at the start of the year about who would do what. That is the only difference between us and the others.”)

4. Discussion

Supported instruction, not co-teaching. The best interpretation that can be made of both Tables 2 and 3 is that the Division provides skilled support in the classroom instead of co-teaching in the traditional sense. While the instrument shows that individual competency of teachers of SNEd is high, the two conditions that in the literature are seen as definitional of SNEd, a shared nature of the teachers' teaching and a recognized parity of authority, are the lowest-rated indicators. This finding of the drift echoes the one documented by Paulsrud and Nilholm (2023) and is consistent with the pattern being not an artefact of western service delivery models as it was found everywhere teachers share a class without protected planning time and roles. It also provides the configuration level mechanism which is not found in Philippine scholarship. The immediate effect of the proximity of the shadow and push-in teacher can be seen here, as studies quote that they act as the single

teacher of one learner (Buenrostro-Jocson, 2024), meaning the classroom is re-structured as a single class with a helper attached. The Philippine version takes the concept to its extreme: One big group with one helper for one child.

Affective returns without cognitive returns. Small-group learning is thought to change the conditions of learning more than its cognitive aspects. Learners speak, question, try, persevere and belong at markedly higher levels; questions are deep and ownership of learning at markedly lower levels. It is this difference that the tripartite framework aims to maintain (Fredricks et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2016). The implementation data explain why: cognitive engagement is created through task design, not through seating arrangement, which is 10th out of 10 at $M = 0.19$; task design is implemented through joint pre-lesson planning, which was ranked 8th out of 10 at $M = 2.25$. In situations where small-group tasks are determined in class, the group is utilized for the purpose of completing the same worksheet, but instead of a more challenging task, it is used to complete the worksheet with additional support. This confirms earlier research by King-Sears et al. (2021) and Stefanidis et al. (2023) finding weak measured achievement effects and the present finding of high affective returns: small groups have a reliable impact on the conditions of learning and on their cognitive content when someone has planned for them.

The transfer gap. Gaining confidence within the group does not ensure greater confidence outside of the group. This is the outcome of social cognitive theory that I will read. With a group size of six, there is greater density of mastery experience, vicarious learning, and verbal persuasion than that of a class size of forty-five, meaning that confidence is reliably built in the small group; transfer occurs when the learner experiences equivalent conditions of safety and access in whole class instruction, which is not the case when small group work is Rarely and instructional authority is retained. The Division's learners with disabilities seem to become more self-assured in an enclave and are then taken to a setting that does not support them. Having to be in the general education classroom, as provided for in Republic Act No. 11650, is not enough to participate in the classroom.

The decisive variable is administrative. The only profile variables that distinguished all three outcome domains were the frequency of scheduled common planning time, and the post hoc pattern is significantly more tractable to policy than usual: between almost none and thirty minutes of common planning time per week, not between thirty minutes and two

hours of common planning time per week. Experience did not predict implementation, and the respondents who talked about working partnerships said that they were due to luck and a fifteen-minute conversation at the beginning of the school year. It is not a practice that spreads from practice or experience or exhortation, however, so it is not self-propagating. As for other factors, the most highly rated enabler was the respondents' willingness to recommend the practice, with class size, space, and time being the lowest rated. The former is plentiful; the latter is not. This places the constraint not on the disposition of teachers, but on that of school heads and the Schools Division Office, an alignment with, and a more precise specification than, the national trend of teacher commitment exceeding system capacity (Beltran et al., 2025; Giger et al., 2025; Llanos et al., 2024).

4.1 Implications for practice and policy

Four actions follow directly from the findings and were drafted with respondent representatives during member checking. First, a **documented co-teaching agreement** negotiated by each SNEd-receiving teacher pair within the first two weeks of the school year, specifying instructional roles, group leadership, and assessment responsibility; this costs nothing and institutionalises what currently depends on luck. Second, a **protected common planning block of at least thirty minutes weekly** reflected in the class programme, which is the highest-yield, lowest-cost action available at school level. Third, a **designated small-group segment in every co-taught block** with deliberate rotation through station, parallel, and alternative teaching, and grouping rules that prevent visible clustering of learners with disabilities. Fourth, a **four-session Learning Action Cell series** under DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016, targeting configuration mechanics for large classes, co-planning routines that fit a thirty-minute block, task design for cognitive demand, and role negotiation, with both members of each pair attending, since training one member leaves the configuration unchanged.

At Division level, the deployment of SNEd teachers warrants review, given that only 36.7% occupy arrangements in which co-teaching is structurally possible, and guidance should clarify that curriculum pacing and assessment requirements do not preclude small-group instruction. At national level, the continuing implementation of the Inclusive Education Act would benefit from an explicit provision on protected collaboration time for SNEd and receiving teacher pairs, which is presently the missing operational link between

the law's guarantee of appropriate education and its delivery in the classroom, and from treating class size in inclusive classrooms as a distinct policy variable, since recommendations derived from international co-teaching research presuppose class sizes materially smaller than those in Philippine urban divisions.

4.2 Limitations

All outcome data relate to teachers' perceptions; teachers make professional inferences about the learner's confidence and engagement rather than measure it. The design is cross-sectional, which means that associations cannot be interpreted as causal, and there is likely to be a bi-directional association between implementation and perceived outcomes. The findings are not necessarily representative of all divisions of different deployment models, class sizes, or ILRC status. The perspectives of receiving teachers, school heads, parents and learners are absent by design, and the account of collaboration is one-sided. Lastly, the researcher's role in the Division may have led some respondents to engage in socially desirable responding, though this potential bias was minimized, but not eliminated, by anonymity, member checking, and external pilot testing.

4.3 Directions for further research

Replication would be performed across divisions with different class sizes, deployment models, and status of the ILRC, to determine if these patterns are regional or national. This design cannot address the causal reading that would be tested by a quasi-experimental implementation of a defined small group protocol with a protected planning block. Reported implementation would be confirmed or not by classroom observation. The collaboration would be finished by receiving teachers, school heads, and as it is ethically permissible learners and parents. The transfer question is of paramount importance: When and how confidence gained in small group settings carried over to whole class settings, and this study found the transfer of confidence to be the weakest link in the mechanism.

5. Conclusion

The special education teachers are structurally unsupported and individually competent in one urban Philippine Schools Division Office three years into the implementation of the Inclusive Education Act. They rarely experience the co-teaching configurations that

involve small groups, rarely feel recognized as co-equal teachers, and rarely plan with their partner teachers, but where they do experience small groups, they witness high increases in learner confidence, on-task behavior, and belonging, and moderate increases in cognitive engagement, with their partner teachers. The degree of implementation is significantly related to each perceived outcome, and the only institutional variable that correlates with whether pairs implement from whether they do not implement is a relatively small amount of protected planning time available per week. The constraint on inclusive practice in this Division is therefore administrative and is correctable: a documented co-teaching agreement, thirty minutes of class program, a targeted series of Learning Action Cells – cost borne by the system, and documented conditions identified in the data.

Declarations

Ethics approval. The study was approved by the Schools Division Office through the Schools Division Research Committee, pursuant to DepEd Order No. 16, s. 2017. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. No data were collected from minors.

Consent for publication. All participants consented to the publication of anonymized findings and reviewed proposed quotations prior to submission.

Availability of data and materials. The full research instrument is available as supplementary material. De-identified datasets are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to the confidentiality undertaking given to the participating Schools Division Office.

Competing interests. The author declares no competing interests.

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