

Frontline Tagging: The Roles and Struggles of Teachers in Identifying Undiagnosed Learners

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Abstract—Inclusive education policies fail to translate into effective classroom support due to persistent systemic gaps and resource shortages. We explored how educators navigate their role as frontline identifiers of learners with suspected disabilities amidst these structural limitations. This research employed a qualitative narrative design, utilizing semi-structured interviews with four participants from various public schools to capture their shared experiences. Using Lipsky's Street-Level Bureaucracy, we found that teachers exercise significant discretionary power to bridge institutional voids through informal and improvised identification practices. We also discovered that this lack of formal support forces a pragmatic shift toward manageable tasks, leading to goal displacement and an increased emotional burden. We realized that the current top-down mandates ignore the lived realities and professional boundaries of those tasked with implementing them. After this realization, we analyzed the coping mechanisms and adaptive resilience that sustain practitioners within these constrained environments. We believe this study underscores the urgent need for policy reforms that align systemic expectations with the actual resources and capacity available to frontline educators.

Index Terms—Frontline Tagging, Roles of Teachers, Struggles of Teachers, Undiagnosed Learners.

1. Introduction

In this section, we presented the problem and its setting, significance of my study, research questions, theory and theoretical lens, and my assumptions.

A. Problem and its Scope

In our exploration of the global landscape of inclusive education, we observe that the current system of identifying student struggles is fundamentally flawed and fails to provide students with the necessary diagnostic and supportive interventions. We find a systemic vacuum where the professionals needed to build these bridges—psychologists and specialists, are largely absent from the school environment. This lack of diagnostic infrastructure often results in "hidden disabilities" that remain unaddressed throughout a child's schooling (World Health Organization, 2021).

When we examine specific international contexts, we see that the struggle to identify learners with special needs is a pervasive challenge that transcends borders. In South Africa and India, research indicates that teachers are burdened by the expectation

to handle neurodiversity without specialist intervention, a struggle that manifests as a profound lack of professional preparation for complex identification tasks (Motshusi et al., 2024; Kushwaha, 2025). Furthermore, studies in Indonesia highlight the difficulty of this identification process, as teachers are forced to rely on personal intuition rather than standardized tools, leading to fundamental inconsistencies in how special needs are recognized (Ariyanto & Kurniawan, 2023). These global examples reinforce the premise that teachers are currently navigating a highly compromised identification process, where the absence of formal diagnostic support forces them into an unreliable and high-stakes role of labeling students based on limited behavioral cues.

1. In the Philippines, the Learner Information System (LIS) forces teachers to "tag" students with disabilities based solely on classroom observations. According to EDCOM 2 (2025), 62% of these learners are identified only by "manifestations" rather than formal medical diagnoses. This compels educators to perform "shadow labor," acting as the sole arbiters of a child's educational path without the necessary clinical training or multidisciplinary support.
2. The reliance on unverified behavioral cues creates a high risk of mislabeling, which compromises the student's right to proper intervention and places an immense ethical burden on teachers. This study addresses a critical research gap regarding the lived struggles of these frontline educators. Aligned with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and the mission of Holy Cross of Davao College, this research advocates for scientifically grounded identification practices to protect both learner rights and teacher professional integrity.

B. Significance of the Study

We are convinced that our study on the struggles of teachers in frontline tagging is significant to support the Sustainable Development Goal on Quality Education. It aligns with the Philippine Development Plan's emphasis on teacher welfare and advances the Christian Education mission of the Holy Cross of Davao College (HCDC). Furthermore, this research holds substantial value for the Department of Education (DepEd), as

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it provides critical, ground-level data that can inform the refinement of inclusive education policies and the enhancement of the Learner Information System (LIS) protocols. By examining the difficulties educators face in identifying undiagnosed learners, our study contributes to sustaining teacher well-being and provides a roadmap for DepEd to strengthen institutional support systems. Ultimately, these findings are essential for delivering inclusive and equitable education while fostering a faith-inspired, humane, and excellent educational environment, especially at the Holy Cross of Davao College where this study was presented.

C. Research Questions

In this study, we aim to explore and describe the challenges of general education teachers as they navigate the roles of identifying and tagging undiagnosed learners in the Learner Information System (LIS). Drawing from Lipsky's Universal Model of Street-Level Bureaucracy, we seek to answer the following:

1. How do general education teachers describe the discrepancy between official government mandates for inclusion and the actual availability of specialized support in their classrooms?
2. How do teachers identify and assess students with suspected disabilities in the absence of clinical experts, including the strategies and practices they employ?
3. How do teachers describe the professional and emotional implications of serving as decision-makers in officially tagging undiagnosed students within the system?

D. Theoretical Lens

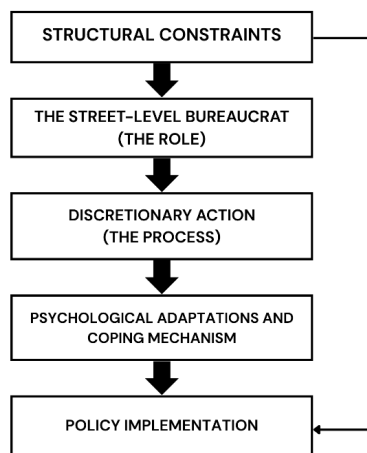


Fig. 1. Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy theory (A General Model)

Our Conceptual Lens follows Lipsky's General Model, illustrating how Structural Constraints—such as chronic resource limits, infinite demand for services, and ambiguous organizational goals—pressure the teacher in their role as a Street-Level Bureaucrat. These constraints force a Discretionary Action process where teachers must assess individual situations and categorize or cluster learners (frontline tagging). Ultimately, this leads to Psychological Adaptations

and Coping Mechanisms, including the modification of client conception and goal displacement, where the act of categorization itself becomes the final Policy Implementation as Policy-Making.

E. Assumptions

We assume that the information provided by our participants will align with the levels of Lipsky's Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, specifically regarding the factors that influence the identification and tagging of undiagnosed learners. We anticipate that their shared experiences will reflect the influences of structural constraints, discretionary actions, psychological adaptations, and the realities of policy implementation. Furthermore, we assume that there will be other information coming out beyond the scope of the theory, allowing us to capture unique and nuanced perspectives that go beyond what is explicitly stated in this theoretical framework.

2. Methodology

A. Research Design

We used Qualitative Descriptive Research in this study. This type of qualitative research design is appropriate because it is used for any study that wishes to give a comprehensive summary of a specific event experienced by an individual or group of individuals. According to Lambert and Lambert (2012), qualitative descriptive research is used when a researcher wants to know the "who, what, and where of events." This design will help us gather information and data from the participants based on their experiences and struggles with frontline tagging in the Learner Information System.

B. Sample and Sampling

We purposively selected seven (7) general education teachers from New Tarlac Elementary School, representing one teacher per grade level (Kindergarten to Grade 6). Participants were selected based on having at least two years of experience and direct involvement in LIS tagging without specialist support. This sample size is sufficient to achieve data saturation (Hossain, 2020), ensuring a comprehensive descriptive summary of the grade-specific challenges encountered in the tagging process.

C. Data Gathering Technique

In this study, we employ the in-depth interview as our primary data gathering technique to elicit the rich, detailed accounts necessary for a qualitative descriptive inquiry. We believe that conducting semi-structured, one-on-one interviews allows us to create a safe space where the general education teachers of New Tarlac Elementary School can openly share their challenges and the "shadow labor" associated with tagging undiagnosed learners. By utilizing open-ended questions, we aim to capture the specific actions taken by the teachers and the professional meanings they ascribe to their discretionary roles (Seidman, 2013). We intend to audio-record and transcribe these sessions verbatim to ensure that our analysis remains strictly grounded in the authentic voices of the participants, thereby preserving the descriptive detail of their situational

logic on the frontline.

D. Data Analysis

For our data analysis, we utilize Thematic Analysis to systematically organize and interpret the transcribed interviews from our participants. We begin this process by engaging in repeated reading of the transcripts to identify significant, non-repetitive phrases related to the tagging of undiagnosed learners. We then group these statements into "meaning units" or themes that represent the core situational logic and professional strain experienced by the teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By synthesizing these themes, we intend to develop a comprehensive textural description of the identification process and a structural description of how the experience was influenced by the school's resource gaps, ultimately providing a clear summary of the phenomenon.

E. Ethical Considerations

We strictly adhere to ethical protocols to protect the rights and well-being of the teachers at New Tarlac Elementary School throughout the research process. We ensure that every participant provides informed consent, acknowledging their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or professional repercussions. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, we utilize pseudonyms and remove all identifying information from the transcripts, ensuring that their shared experiences regarding "shadow labor" or discretionary decisions cannot be traced back to them (American Psychological Association, 2017). Furthermore, we commit to the secure storage and eventual destruction of all audio recordings and raw data to prevent any unauthorized access, upholding our moral responsibility as researchers to do no harm while documenting these sensitive professional narratives.

3. Results

As we carefully examined the responses of the participants, their narratives revealed a shared reality shaped by systemic gaps, professional responsibility, and emotional weight. Across varying years of experience and grade levels, their voices converged into patterns that reflect how they navigate their complex roles. The findings are organized into three primary themes corresponding to the research questions.

A. The Discrepancy Between Policy Mandates and Classroom Reality

Structural Constraints and the Necessity of Improvisation. Participants consistently described a tangible gap between inclusive education mandates and the actual support available in classrooms. While policies promise equitable access, individualized support, trained personnel, and adequate resources, teachers often experience chronic shortages in materials, training, and specialist support. One teacher shared,

"We're expected to have SPED specialists and intervention programs, but most of the time, we rely on what little training we have and our own improvisation" (Participant 2).

Another reflected,

"I don't have enough instructional materials or devices for learners who need them" (Participant 3).

This persistent gap forces teachers to rely heavily on creative problem-solving under constrained conditions.

Goal Displacement Toward Manageable Practices. Overwhelmed by systemic demands and limited support, teachers adjust to the discrepancy by prioritizing what is feasible rather than what is ideal. This pragmatic shift reflects a survival strategy within constrained systems. One participant stated,

"We focus on maintaining classroom order first; otherwise, nothing else can happen" (Participant 3).

Another added,

"Differentiated instruction happens, but only within what I can realistically manage" (Participant 1),

illustrating how daily practice aligns with realistic achievements rather than policy expectations.

B. Navigating Identification and Assessment Without Clinical Support

Discretionary Practices and Experience-Based Strategies. In the absence of adequate institutional support, teachers assume the role of street-level bureaucrats, exercising discretionary judgment. Their process is practical, systematic, and experience-based. Lacking standardized diagnostic tools, teachers rely heavily on structured classroom observation, anecdotal records, checklists, and informal assessments.

"I keep notes of what each learner does daily, then I compare patterns over a week or two to see who needs extra help," shared Participant 1.

To ensure appropriateness, teachers triangulate data through collaboration:

"If I'm unsure, I check with my co-teachers and even parents to see if the same behaviors happen at home" (Participant 2).

Blurred Boundaries and Support-Focused Interventions. The necessity of assessing students forces a collision between instruction and assessment, turning teachers into "pseudo-diagnosticians." They observe developmental patterns and design interventions without formal guidance.

"I have to adjust lessons based on what I see, even if there's no official diagnosis," noted Participant 3.

To manage this blurred boundary, teachers shift their approach away from applying clinical labels toward providing

responsiveness and support-focused interventions tailored to observed student needs.

C. Professional and Emotional Implications of Informal Tagging

Emotional Burden and Ethical Tension. Serving as the frontline identifiers of suspected disabilities carries significant emotional and ethical pressures. Teachers experience high levels of stress, self-doubt, and fear regarding the impact of their informal assessments. One participant shared the weight of this responsibility:

"I constantly ask myself, 'Am I interpreting this correctly?' because a wrong decision can affect the child's future" (Participant 3).

Furthermore, teachers fear the negative consequences of their lack of formal training, with one noting,

"I worry about stigmatizing the child or giving parents wrong information" (Participant 2).

Coping Mechanisms and Professional Resilience. Despite the profound emotional strain and ethical tension, teachers demonstrate strong professional resilience to sustain their practice. They develop psychological and practical adaptations to cope with systemic pressures. Key strategies include systematic documentation, reflective practice

"After each observation, I review what worked and what didn't" – (Participant 2),

and setting professional boundaries by focusing on student achievement rather than clinical labels. Peer support is also a vital coping mechanism:

"Consulting with co-teachers and parents gives me guidance and reassures me that I'm not alone in making decisions" (Participant 1).

D. Summary of Findings

RQ1: How do general education teachers describe the discrepancy between official government mandates for inclusion and the actual availability of specialized support in their classrooms?

Teachers describe a persistent gap where policies promise specialized support, materials, and trained personnel, but the classroom reality involves chronic shortages that force them to rely heavily on improvisation.

RQ2: How do teachers identify and assess students with suspected disabilities in the absence of clinical experts, including the strategies and practices they employ?

Teachers rely on practical, experience-based methods, specifically employing structured observations, anecdotal records, peer comparisons, informal assessments, and collaboration with parents and co-teachers to triangulate data.

RQ3: How do teachers describe the professional and

emotional implications of serving as decision-makers in officially tagging undiagnosed students within the system?

Professionally, teachers feel forced into the role of "pseudo-diagnosticians." Emotionally, they experience high stress, self-doubt, and a heavy ethical burden driven by the fear that their lack of formal training might lead to mislabeling or stigmatizing the child.

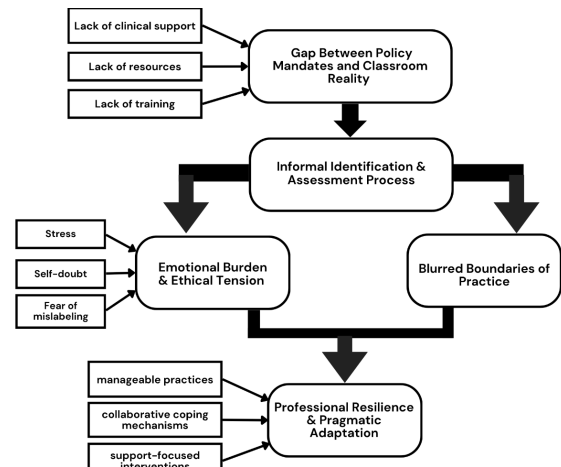


Fig. 2. Modified paradigm

4. Discussions

In this section, we discuss the implications of the educators' collective journey, specifically in sizing up the veracity of Lipsky's Street-Level Bureaucracy and how it manifests in the identification of learners with suspected disabilities. We also explore how these findings may transform human practices within the classroom and address the critical intersection of systemic policy and teacher well-being. The following themes emerge from a careful examination of the participants' shared realities.

A. The Discrepancy Between Policy Mandates and Classroom Reality

Our finding reveals that teachers describe a persistent gap where policies promise specialized support, materials, and trained personnel, but the classroom reality involves chronic shortages that force them to rely heavily on improvisation. It is consistent with the study of Dela Fuente (2021), who identifies inconsistent policy implementation due to funding shortages. Moreover, it also harmonizes with the study of Reyes (2020), who highlights how systemic hurdles prevent equal access to resources.

In contrast, our finding contradicts the study of Obcial et al. (2025), which suggests that robust administrative systems can successfully translate inclusive policies into effective practice. Ultimately, these educators' struggles affirm Lipsky's theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy, where policy is essentially "made" on the ground through the daily adjustments of frontline workers who reinterpret mandates through limited resources to create a functional version of inclusion.

B. Navigating Identification and Assessment Without Clinical Support

As we delve deeper in our finding, we found out that teachers rely on practical, experience-based methods, specifically employing structured observations, anecdotal records, peer comparisons, informal assessments, and collaboration with parents and co-teachers to triangulate data. It is consistent with the study of Alsarawi (2025), who supports their reliance on classroom interactions. Moreover, it also harmonizes with the study of Nakalule (2024), who emphasizes that frontline educators must often depend on school records when specialist access is restricted.

However, our finding contradicts the study of McKenzie et al. (2020), who argue that screening tools must meet rigorous psychometric standards for validity, which the participants' informal methods may lack. Nevertheless, these actions are a hallmark of street-level bureaucrats who, according to Lipsky, use professional autonomy to simplify complex tasks and create workable solutions that allow them to function in a system lacking formal diagnostic infrastructure.

C. Professional and Emotional Implications of Informal Tagging

We found out that professionally, teachers feel forced into the role of "pseudo-diagnosticians," and emotionally, they experience high stress, self-doubt, and a heavy ethical burden driven by the fear that their lack of formal training might lead to mislabeling or stigmatizing the child. It is consistent with the study of Dani et al. (2024), who note the vulnerability of making high-stakes decisions without expertise. Moreover, it also harmonizes with the study of Teodosio (2022), who highlights the risks of stigmatization in these contexts.

In contrast, our finding contradicts the study of Berchiatti et al. (2021), who maintain that disability identification should remain strictly within the scope of trained psychologists following established protocols. This emotional weight highlights the "unhappy" nature of frontline work described by Lipsky, as street-level bureaucrats feel a sense of betrayal when they cannot provide the high-quality service promised by policy, forcing them to form informal support networks and sub-cultures of resilience to endure their environment.

D. Implications for Practice

Our study highlights several key implications for practice and policy. First, teachers' reliance on discretionary judgment underscores the importance of ongoing professional development in inclusive practices, early identification strategies, and classroom-based interventions. Second, structural constraints, including the scarcity of specialists, assistive devices, and assessment tools, demonstrate the need for policymakers and school leaders to prioritize resources that enable effective inclusive education. Third, fostering collaboration between general education teachers, SPED teachers, and school psychologists can reduce uncertainty, improve accuracy in learner identification, and strengthen classroom interventions. Fourth, clarifying policy implementation and providing standardized procedures can

help teachers bridge the gap between policy intent and classroom reality. Finally, recognizing teachers' role as frontline implementers and valuing their discretion can inform decision-making, resource allocation, and ongoing evaluation of inclusive practices.

E. Future Directions

We recommend future research investigating how teacher coping mechanisms affect professional effectiveness and well-being, examining learner outcomes for those identified through informal classroom-based processes, and evaluating the effectiveness of existing inclusive education policies in real-world contexts. Exploring the integration of technology, such as digital tools or learning analytics, may provide practical solutions to assist teachers in resource-limited settings. Comparative studies across educational systems could identify best practices and inform policy improvements, particularly in contexts where teachers act as frontline implementers of inclusion. By pursuing these directions, future research can deepen understanding of how structural constraints, discretionary action, and coping strategies interact to shape inclusive education, ultimately guiding the development of policies and practices that better support both teachers and learners.

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Appendix
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Probing Questions
How do general education teachers describe the discrepancy between official government mandates for inclusion and the actual availability of specialized support in their classrooms?	How would you describe the gap between government mandates on inclusive education and the actual support available in your classroom?	<p>a. What specific types of support are expected versus what is actually available?</p> <p>b. Can you describe situations where this gap becomes most evident in your teaching?</p> <p>c. How does this discrepancy affect your day-to-day classroom practices?</p>
How do teachers identify and assess students with suspected disabilities in the absence of clinical experts, including the strategies and practices they employ?	How do you identify and assess students with suspected disabilities in the absence of clinical experts?	<p>a. What strategies or methods do you commonly use in identifying these learners?</p> <p>b. What challenges do you encounter in the process of assessment or identification?</p> <p>c. How do you ensure that your decisions are appropriate or accurate?</p>
How do teachers describe the professional and emotional implications of serving as decision-makers in officially tagging undiagnosed students within the system?	How would you describe the professional and emotional implications of being responsible for tagging undiagnosed students?	<p>a. What professional responsibilities do you feel when making these decisions?</p> <p>b. What emotions or concerns arise when you assign labels or classifications to students?</p> <p>c. How do you cope with or manage these responsibilities and feelings?</p>