

## Beyond the classroom: a qualitative study of the lived experiences of special needs education teachers in the Philippines

Exploring the influence of emotional intelligence in education: perspectives and challenges

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### ABSTRACT

Teachers of Special Education (SNED) help students with a wide range of emotional, physical, mental, and academic needs. However, they also face various other issues, such as managing behaviour, inclusion, and differentiation. The study employed a qualitative approach, particularly the phenomenological method, to gain insights into the lived experiences of these educators. Five participants are regular teachers with over five years of service residing in Sta. Cruz Davao del Sur, Philippines, was purposively selected for the study. The primary challenges identified by the participants include the need for more training and resources. These challenges often lead to high stress levels and burnout among SNED teachers. However, these educators employ adaptive strategies to cope with these challenges, including modifying their teaching methods, collaborating with colleagues, and engaging parents in learning. The insights gained from the study highlight the importance of teacher growth and student development. The participants noted improvements in their students' abilities as a significant reward for their hard work. Moreover, teacher's dedication and commitment to individualized instruction significantly contribute to these students' overall academic and social development.

**Keywords:** Special needs education teachers, Special education teachers, Qualitative Research, Phenomenological, Philippines.

### RESUMO

Docentes de Educação Especial (DEE) ajudam os alunos com uma ampla gama de necessidades emocionais, físicas, mentais e acadêmicas. No entanto, também enfrentam vários outros problemas, como a gestão do comportamento, a inclusão e a diferenciação. O estudo empregou uma abordagem qualitativa, particularmente o método fenomenológico, para obter insights sobre as experiências vividas por esses educadores. Cinco participantes são professores regulares com mais de cinco anos de serviço residentes em Sta. Cruz Davao del Sur, Filipinas, foi selecionada propositalmente para o estudo. Os principais desafios identificados pelos participantes incluem a necessidade de mais formação e recursos. Estes desafios conduzem frequentemente a elevados níveis de stress e esgotamento entre os professores do SNED. No entanto, estes educadores empregam estratégias adaptativas para lidar com estes desafios, incluindo a modificação dos seus métodos de ensino, a colaboração com os colegas e o envolvimento dos pais na aprendizagem. Os insights obtidos com o estudo destacam a importância do crescimento dos professores e do desenvolvimento dos alunos. Os participantes notaram melhorias nas habilidades de seus alunos como uma recompensa significativa pelo seu trabalho árduo. Além disso, a dedicação e o compromisso dos professores com o ensino individualizado contribuem significativamente para o desenvolvimento acadêmico e social global destes alunos.

**Palabras clave:** Profesores de educación especial, Profesores de educación especial, Pesquisa Qualitativa, Fenomenológica, Filipinas.

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, Special Needs Education (SNED) teachers are crucial in offering assistance and instruction to students with various learning, emotional, physical, and memorable needs while facing challenges such as inclusion, differentiation, managing behaviour, and many more. Special needs education teachers embody dedication and compassion to ensure that they satisfy students' needs regardless of their abilities and access equal opportunities to learn and thrive in the learning process as part of their duties. Special needs education teachers sacrifice their days to teach those particular students. Special children are those children who require total assistance for their mental and physical issues.

In the last thirty years, the persistent lack of special education teachers has been a significant problem for schools in several countries (Reeves et al., 2021). Developing a racially diverse exceptional education teaching workforce is crucial for the academic achievement of kids with disabilities, especially students of colour with impairments (Scott et al., 2021). High levels of stress connected to teaching were found to predict symptoms of anxiety and depression in both special and general education instructors; however, special education teachers experienced much higher levels of stress (Potter, 2021), the

perceived stress among special education teachers and its impact on their ability to engage in transformational teaching (Saroinsong et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, SNED teachers cannot enjoy their life outside work because of local support from the government physically and financially, though they experience burnout (Balading et al., 2023). Teachers had a hard time understanding answers from essays of students with answers in braille, and some regular teachers had a hard time assisting students with cerebral palsy during seizures (Rosales, 2019).

In the locality of Sta. Cruz, Davao del Sur, Special Needs Education teachers have similarities in the difficulties they face daily in school. Teachers have students who have different personalities inside the class; they try their best to cater to their students. However, some experience seizures inside the class, which can trigger their teaching patience (M. Gavilan, personal communication, February 22, 2024).

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the challenges and experiences of special needs education teachers in teaching students with special needs and determine their coping strategies and insights.

## METHODS

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the research process used in conducting this study.

### Research Design

In this study, the researchers used a qualitative approach, particularly the phenomenological approach. This approach was used to understand special needs education teachers' struggles, coping mechanisms, and insights. Guillen (2019) asserts that the phenomenological approach leads to describing and interpreting the essence of individuals' lived experiences. This method helps investigate the participants' experiences and trials to determine their coping mechanisms in dealing with such challenges.

### Research Participants

There were five purposively selected participants. Purposive sampling enhances methodological soundness by aligning the sample with research goals, ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as addressed (Campbell et al., 2020). The participants of this study should meet the following criteria: (a) must be regular teachers, (b) must be in service for five years and above, and (c) must be teaching in public or private, in elementary or secondary school.

### Instrument and Analysis

The researchers employed a validated interview guide question, which the expert validated. We used thematic analysis to analyze the data gathered. The method that we utilized was Colaizzi's Method. The extension to Colaizzi's Method of analysis emanated from recent research conducted by the authors on all participants expressing their experiences through everyday language (Edward et al., 2011).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In alignment with the study's aims, we categorized the findings into three sections: examining special needs education teachers' experiences, coping strategies, and insight.

### Experiences of Special Needs Education Teachers

Our first question focuses on the experiences of special needs education teachers. After we analyzed the data, one theme emerged: the need for teachers' training and resources.

**Lack of teachers' training and resources.** The participants had difficulty handling learners with physical and mental challenges. As our participant mentioned during our interview, *"It is tough to teach because I also struggle with understanding what to do, and that is the most challenging part of teaching the visually impaired."* (R1, page 1, Line 1-4). In the Philippines, visually impaired students have below normative physical fitness levels, with minimal training and limited materials hindering their participation in physical activity programs (Tolentino et al., 2022). In addition, based on the statement of Kayla, 28 years old and has been teaching for four years in education, shared, *"I have two individuals with Level 3 Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and they cannot even recognize the alphabet or handle a pencil. It is challenging."* (R2, Page 4, Line 1-4)

Teaching challenges for students with autism spectrum disorders in general physical education include inattentive behaviours, social impairment, emotional regulation difficulties, and the need for support (Obrusnikova & Dillon, 2011). Other participants said that lack of resources support, like classroom and financial support, is one of their problems. Based on

Karen's statement, a 28-year-old, "*The school provides support, but sometimes it takes a long time, so that it can be challenging.*" (R5, Page 11, Line 8). The main obstacle to implementing inclusive education is the need for more resources. It indicates that teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education and self-efficacy significantly influence their perception of resources (Golden et al., 2021). Teachers have raised apprehensions regarding the inclusion of students exhibiting autism spectrum disorders and emotional and behavioural challenges in mainstream education due to issues such as social skills deficits, behavioural challenges, curriculum adaptations, and insufficient training and support (Cassady, 2011).

### **Coping Mechanisms of Special Needs Education Teachers**

The second question of our study focuses on determining their coping mechanism as they faced the challenges of being special needs education teachers. The typical coping strategies participants mentioned were **modifying their teaching methods, collaborating with colleagues, and engaging parents in learning.**

The participants enhance learning through dynamic and adaptive teaching approaches. By the experience of Karen, a 28-year-old with five years of teaching, said, "*We always strive to modify our teaching methods to be as simple as possible*" (R5, page 16, line 14). Higher percentages of general educators than special educators reported substantially modifying their lessons to serve Students with Disabilities (SWD), including better addressing the content in their content area and providing more enrichment activities (Stelitano et al., 2020).

In addition, Aila, a 28 yrs old with four years of teaching, concludes, "*We modified it to be like playing; they are always playing. You can make it playtime and sometimes create stories for them to learn*" ( R4, page 12, line 14). Who similarly determined that teachers use additional positive strategies, including praise and positive reinforcement, as well as applying classroom management strategies to inspire students to overcome difficulties, which increases their learning achievement (Pocan, 2022), advocates for inclusive teaching by providing strategies to adapt curriculum, activities, assessment, and resources to meet the diverse needs of students in modern classrooms Westwood (2018). The participants enhance special education through collaborative support and parental engagement. As one of our participants mentioned, "*Always coordinate with the parents so they can help us. Oh, constant reading is the only thing. Just repeat it until they learn; that is it. Ask for help from the parents*" (R1, Page 2, Line 16).

In the United States, where inclusive practices have a history spanning more than thirty years, the present professional standards for special educators emphasize the need for certified professionals to possess strong collaboration and co-teaching abilities to optimize services for students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Jones et al., 2014). Other of our participants also mentioned that she appreciates those people who helped her when it comes to teaching her learners. She said, "*It is a collaboration with colleagues, for example, because ma'am Aily ASD, ma'am said that you should share with them how about your name, Parkner, you should give them ideas and thoughts.*" (R2, Page 5 line 16). Numerous researchers and experts in the special education domain have examined different collaboration methods. Subsequent research has highlighted the advantages for all stakeholders, including children, families, educators, school leaders, district administrators, and the communities they support (Hedeen et al., 2011). By examining collaborative teaming from the parental perspective, the research provides an understanding of parental expertise, collaborative dynamics, and the complex nature of the parental role (Kervick, 2017). Several research works have emphasized the significance of parent-teacher collaboration in special education within Lebanon. Practitioners widely believe that establishing effective parent-teacher alliances is crucial among the numerous educational hurdles encountered by special education organizations (Aouad & Bento, 2019).

### **Insights of Special Needs Education Teachers**

The third question of this study focuses on determining the insights of special needs education teachers. Their insights include teachers' growth and student development.

**Teachers' Growth and Student Development.** The development of teachers and students is closely connected to the lasting effects of the success of special needs educators and the acknowledgment they receive for their committed work with students. One of our participants stated her experience by saying, "*As a special education (SNED) teacher, I have witnessed improvements among the children. I have observed significant progress over 18 years as a SPED teacher because I have had successful students. For example, a visually impaired student could travel to Manila.*" ( R1, Page 2, Line 20).

Across various education levels and identification methods, the findings suggest that the presence of special needs students does not have a statistically significant impact on the academic performance of their peers (Ruijs, 2017). Another participant also mentioned that she is happy seeing her students improve; it makes her smile and proud. Kayla, a 27-year-old who has been teaching for seven years in education, said, "*A reward for myself is when my students can write their names. Initially, they did not know how to trace letters, but they could do it after a couple of years.*" (R2, Page 6, Line 22).

Nonetheless, the degree of involvement and adaptability exhibited by individual teachers will significantly influence the success or failure of the planned collaborative structure (Pülschen et al., 2015). Additionally, one participant stated that her students can now write and read. Aila, a 30-year-old who has been teaching for 10 years in education, "*You will be happy*

to know they can now read, write, and even hold a pencil. They can write their names, even though sometimes there are still mistakes. Another achievement is that they can graduate from elementary school and continue to high school." (R4, Page 13, Line 20).

The link between teachers' emotional states and students' perceptions of their teachers' effectiveness, as well as to identify the factors influencing students' opinions on teachers' instructional success based on the emotional aspects of teachers (Toraby et al., 2018). The participants developed humility and patience for essential lessons in special education. Our participants' statement regarding this, Jema, a 35-year-old who has been teaching for ten years in education, said, "I learned to become humble, realizing that I am just one of the many special education teachers." (R1, Page 3, Line 22).

Additionally, coaching helped teachers grow personally and professionally, resulting in crafting lessons that made students more successful in learning the lesson (Ortozero et al., 2022). The next participant also discussed her realization for a teacher, and she stated her experience: "I have truly realized the importance of patience, especially in teaching children. Patience is maintaining composure and understanding even when faced with challenging situations. It is a valuable trait that can also be applied to other aspects of our lives" (R3, Page 9, Line 22). Enhancing the social environment and learning system is significant to self-resilience in students with special needs (Azwar et al., 2021). Furthermore, a participant also mentioned her realization:

"To be more patient and extend my patience even further, while maintaining a positive outlook." (R5, Page 17, Line 22). Support teacher development and inform human capital decisions (Jones et al., 2022)..

## CONCLUSIONS

Special education teachers embody dedication and compassion to ensure that they satisfy student needs regardless of their abilities and access equal opportunities to learn and thrive in the learning process as part of their duties. We discovered that the main challenges of special needs education (SNED) teachers are lack of teacher training and resources, and their coping mechanism is teachers initiative and collaboration with colleagues, and lastly, their insights as special needs education (SNED) teachers' growth and student development. We have also concluded that special needs education teachers are crucial in promoting inclusive education and fostering a supportive learning environment for students with special needs. Moreover, their ability to adapt teaching strategies and provide personalized support enables students with special needs to reach their full potential.

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