

TEACHING LEARNERS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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Abstract

Special education (SPED) teachers encounter issues with student behaviors, particularly when their students are unsatisfied with their education. Understanding the student's impairment and establishing coping techniques can help them control their behavior. This study analyzes the experiences of special education teachers in Koronadal City, South Cotabato. This study used the Transcendental Phenomenological Method and interviews. A thematic analysis revealed the importance of fulfillment, overcoming challenges, professional progress, and support networks in building an inclusive learning environment. Emphasized also is the call for collaboration, advocacy, and innovation for a comprehensive learning environment. Teachers are committed to building acceptance and accommodation within the community as the foundation of an inclusive education system. It is recommended to develop comprehensive programs, collaboration, teacher-student relationships, and a safe learning environment to enrich special education. Anti-stigma efforts must be introduced to modify societal prejudice, giving SPED learners the opportunities to be independent and develop life skills intended for employment.

Keywords: Special Education (SPED), Special Education Learners, Special Education Teachers, Lived Experiences, Inclusivity.

Introduction

Over a billion people, or 157% of the global population, lived with some form of disability in 2011, as reported by the World Health Organization and the World Bank. In the Philippines, 15 million of the country's 100 million children, teenagers, and adults have disabilities. UNICEF (2016) as cited by DepEd (2021) estimates that 3.3 million of this population attends school. These learners with impairments face difficulties that prevent them from fully accessing K–12 Basic Education. The department is concentrating on strengthening its techniques for identifying Filipino learners with disabilities and delivering appropriate educational interventions. To uphold the rights of children with disabilities under RA 7277, as amended by RA 10070, national agencies and local government units must be considered.

Education for learners with special needs has developed from special education to integrated education and inclusive education. Despite numerous legislations and programs, SPED encounters obstacles and is a global topic of concern, which the Philippines is actively studying. It is considered a new education paradigm and part of the global education for all agenda. Considering legal systems that support universal education, the Philippines is not doing enough to address the implementation of SPED programs. SPED teachers encounter issues in dealing with student behaviors, particularly when students with impairments are unsatisfied with their education. Special education has historically faced injustices, demotion to mental facilities, lack of resources, and punishing procedures. To attain its full potential, individuals must adopt concepts and practices (Toson & Weisling, 2023).

This study focuses on the experiences of SPED teachers, their interactions with pupils receiving special education, the joys, and difficulties in providing support to SPED students, and how they overcome these difficulties to create inclusive learning environments. This has implications for different aspects of societal systems to better comprehend and discover the complex dynamics of SPED.

Research Questions

This study analyzes the experiences of teachers in Koronadal City, specifically in special education.

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The following queries must be addressed: (a)What are the lived experiences of teachers handling learners in special education? (b)What contexts do teachers with special needs encounter in their own lived experiences? (c)How do teachers handling learners in special education view themselves in the future?

Methodology

This study uses the Transcendental Phenomenological Method as an approach that explores a person's lived experiences. The study focused on how teachers dealt with SPED students. This was conducted in Koronadal National Comprehensive National High School (KNCHS) and Marbel 1 Central Elementary School (M1CES), both of which have an existing SPED Program in Koronadal City, South Cotabato. With purposive sampling, three (3) SPED teachers from each school a total of six (6) SPED teachers, were identified as the participants. With the approval to conduct the interview, participants completed a series of interviews. The participants' responses were recorded to ensure that no data were changed. Thematic analysis of Moustakas' phenomenological data analysis was employed. It includes preparing data for analysis, phenomenologically lowering the data, participating in creative variation, and identifying the heart of the experience (Protacio, 2022).

Results and Discussion

The experiences of SPED teachers are characterized by twelve (12) emerging themes, comprising (a)Fulfillment of Teachers in Teaching Learners with Special Needs, (b)Overcoming the Challenges in Special Needs Education, (c)Professional Growth and Adaptability through Experiences, (d)Resources and Support Systems for Special Education Teachers to Meet the Diverse Needs of their Students, (e)Support from Internal and External Stakeholders, (f)Supportive Environment for Learners within the School Setting, (g)Adherence to the K-12 Curriculum, (h)Negative Perception and Stereotyping of Learners with Special Needs within the Community, (i)Personalized Approach to Teaching for Learners with Special Needs, (j)Long-Term Career Dedication of Teachers in Special Needs Education, (k)Job Opportunities for Learners with Special Needs, and (l)Teachers' Aspiration for Learner Independence.

Theme 1. Fulfillment of Teachers in Teaching Learners

When teachers have job satisfaction, they will exhibit positive attitudes (Muguongo et al., 2015). This is demonstrated by the happiness of witnessing students' gradual progress and transformative development as they overcome educational obstacles. P6 shared, "Although...the progress may come in small steps, the fulfillment in every small

achievement, knowing that such, is a significant accomplishment for them or on their part."

Through their dedication and empathy, teachers shape the academic and personal trajectories of SPED learners, leaving an indelible mark of empowerment, resilience, and achievement.

Theme 2. Overcoming the Challenges

The main goal of SPED teacher preparation programs is to provide teachers with the skills to understand and implement evidence-based approaches in the classroom (Ergenekon, 2014). However, some teachers received insufficient training in SPED. As P2 shared, "I needed to be trained...training is number one."

Research shows that beginning teachers enter the field unprepared for classroom management (Dwyer, 2013), possibly because teacher education programs are insufficient to prepare teachers to manage classrooms with diverse learners and behavioral challenges. P5 shared, "I first encountered challenges while teaching learners with hearing impairment...I don't have a background in sign language, so I struggled one time..."

SPED teachers have concerns about managing the behavior of learners. Interacting with a learner with special needs requires relationship building (Walsh, 2018). It is essential for these learners to feel relaxed before they develop trust in others as they frequently exhibit behaviors that may disrupt others. In response to this, teachers employ strategies to manage their behaviors. Shared by P3, "We have this intervention program that we do, and their routine must be structured intended for a particular day or week. Their behavior must be structured."

Through gradual introduction and practicing new concepts, they can store this information in their memory and eventually integrate it into their everyday routines (Estojero, 2022).

Theme 3. Professional Growth and Adaptability through Experiences

Through firsthand experiences, teachers understand the diverse learning profiles in their classrooms. SPED teachers display adaptability by handling circumstances with open minds to consider different perspectives. As stated by P2, "I understand their disability, and there I realized that the learners need the teacher's presence."

Teachers engage in ongoing professional development through adaptation. Significantly, they are constantly prompted to reassess and refine their instructional approaches.

Theme 4. Resources and Support Systems of Teachers to Meet Diverse Needs

According to Owoko (2009), the term 'resources' refers not only to teaching methods and materials but also to the knowledge and skills from training and experience. SPED teachers aspire to hone their knowledge more through training. P1 said, "Just like what the education supervisor observes...that training is needed..." Also shared by P2, "The resources that I need is training..."

While teachers need relevant training, SPED learners should also have access to assistive devices that will help them accomplish their tasks independently. P6 mentioned, "I think SNED teachers need more assistive devices and learning materials."

Access to assistive technology devices remains financially challenging, preventing SPED students from accessing them in the classroom. This calls for collaboration with stakeholders, as they can support the funding for the resources needed by teachers and learners in SPED.

Theme 5. Support from Internal and External Stakeholders

The success of SPED students depends on collaboration among stakeholders. In the case of the participants in the study, the teachers needed materials for the different levels of learners. It was reported that when they sought help from stakeholders, assistance was provided to them. This proves that stakeholders fulfill their parts to support the needs of SPED learners. P5 shared, "That time, my heart was overwhelmed, and God answered my prayer through that stakeholder. Not only that, but a TV was given, and the provided fund was utilized to buy each SPED classroom a TV. After that, I invited external stakeholders and saw that by that time, SPED centers had woven bamboo walls only. The congressman saw that there were lacking facilities, so, he decided to donate..."

Stakeholder engagement is important to raise funds to effectively implement SPED projects (Niro and Petilla, 2019). It necessitates linkages to communicate the school's needs and meet the goals for teacher and learner improvement.

Theme 6. Supportive Environment for Learners

The school environment where the participants are assigned to teach SPED learners is conducive to learning. Teachers ensure that the learning atmosphere is less distracting and transforms the classroom into a 'class home'. P3 said, "Our setting when it comes to the facility, we have classrooms, individualized tables for different learners, and learners are scheduled depending on their time availability."

Vygotsky's main emphasis is on the interaction between the individual and the environment (1978). Development is dependent on surrounding

conditions such as home conditions and the learning environment. Teachers give their students a sense of belongingness by providing them with individualized support and positive reinforcement to build socio-emotional growth and well-being.

Theme 7. Adherence to the K-12 Curriculum

The main purpose of K-12 is to provide inclusivity for all children, which implies that all children, regardless of disability, should be able to learn alongside their peers in a general education classroom as much as possible. Moreover, central to K-12, is the development of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). IEP is a personalized document that outlines the specific educational goals and accommodations a student with disabilities will receive. It is developed collaboratively between educators, parents, and, in some cases, the students (Smith, 2023). P3 said, "Learner's needs are specified there. For example, the functional academic package...All packages like skills, care skills, and transition programs are implemented for them."

Theme 8. Negative Perception and Stereotyping of Learners

Common myths and misunderstandings about disability promote negative images, which act as barriers to participation in society. Perceptions influence not just teachers, but most significantly, the parents of the learners. P3 stated, "Parents of the SPED learners are embarrassed about learners' situation, because in the context of our community for them is that their children are 'bad luck'..."

SPED teachers promote an understanding of diverse disabilities by increasing community awareness. P6 mentioned, "The limited awareness and education about types of disabilities...becomes a challenge to us in advocating and explaining the importance of inclusive practices."

Negative attitudes stigmatize people with disabilities, denying them equal development opportunities. However, when a community recognizes that SPED students have the same opportunities as other individuals, it will create an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance.

Theme 9. Personalized Approach to Teaching for Learners

Teaching students in the same way no longer meets the rigorous academic demands of today's education reform (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002). Teachers should recognize the strengths and weaknesses of learners as a basis to pattern the teaching approaches. P5 shared, "...you have to check the learner's background first, to know what learning materials to prepare..." P6 stated, "...we need to know their strengths, weaknesses, and needs, and pattern them to our teaching approaches."

Through ongoing assessment, observation, and collaboration with other professionals, teachers gather information about students' learning abilities, social-emotional development, and specific learning difficulties.

Theme 10. Long-Term Career Dedication of Teachers in Special Needs Education

The participants expressed their long-term commitment to educating learners with special needs because they believe they have a heart for these learners and want to continue advocating for them. P3 shared, "I see in myself to continue the advocacy for the acceptance for these SPED learners to be accommodated in the classroom, to be accepted in the community..."

SPED teachers perceived their jobs to be rewarding. They get personal fulfillment and gratification in teaching special needs students. P4 shared, "...if you have the passion, ability, or empathy to stay and teach these children, you will get to love them." P5 also said, "I already love the students, and I already love my work. Because when you join the world of special education, you will find... happiness in your heart, cause not all people can accept them. In my mind, I think, 'Who will accept them if I leave?'"

Despite claims that teaching SPED students is a difficult job, the participants demonstrated the utmost commitment to continue their efforts to contribute meaningfully to the lives of their learners.

Theme 11. Job Opportunities for Learners with Special Needs

The denial of equal employment opportunities to people with disabilities forms causes of poverty and exclusion of many members of this group. SPED teachers aspire that after SPED learners finish their education, there will be establishments willing to employ them. P5 stated, "I plan and hope that some stakeholders...after seeing our graduates of Grade 12 having nowhere to go to, I have thought of putting up a business...Why not train them and ask for some help from TESDA schools to enroll them and have training in that business..." P6 also shared, "I have many programs for them. One of which is the SNED Panaderia. A bakery inside the school will require SNED learners' skills, at the same time, it will be of great help for their daily fare or allowance."

Given the increasing need to address this, SPED teachers are driven to establish partnerships, including entrepreneurs and technical education and skills development authorities.

Theme 12. Teachers' Aspiration for Learner Independence

The primary purpose of SPED teachers is to prepare learners for independence because they might not always have their parents or teachers. Life skills are

the ability to adapt and have positive behavior to face all the demands in life. P6 mentioned, "...one of my goals is for them to be able to provide for their own." P2 said, "My goal is for them to survive...they do not have their parents forever."

SPED teachers aspire for their students to become self-reliant in the future and strive to equip their students with the necessary skills as independence is an essential aspect of adulthood.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of SPED teachers underscore the importance of fulfillment, overcoming challenges, professional progress, and hard support networks in building an inclusive and successful learning environment. Also, this study underlines the complexity of special needs education and calls for continuing collaboration, advocacy, and innovation to create a more inclusive, equitable, and outstanding learning environment for all learners. The need for continuing collaboration, advocacy, and innovation to build an inclusive education system is also emphasized. This study suggests the improvement of SPED students' learning experience and outcomes through building networks and linkages, calling for resources and a support system, all while supporting SPED teachers through seminars and enrichment of a conducive learning environment equipped with assistive materials, to also improve the teacher-student partnerships. Aligned with this is giving emphasis on differentiated learning and ensuring IEPs reflect individual student requirements, this gives opportunities to share awareness of the conditions of SPED learners. Anti-stigma efforts should be introduced to modify negative societal views and encourage positive representation of individuals with disabilities. This stresses the need to enhance job opportunities for SPED learners, collaborating with local businesses and government agencies to promote inclusive employment prospects. Lastly, this study suggests legislative changes at local, national, and international levels to eradicate prejudice, promote equal opportunity, and safeguard the rights of those with disabilities.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

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