

## The Plight of SPED Teachers: A Phenomenological Study

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### Abstract:

Special Education (SPED) teachers play an important role in providing quality education to kids with a wide range of learning challenges. They do, however, encounter challenges that have an impact on their teaching efficacy, well-being, and professional development. These include insufficient resources, heavy workloads, emotional and mental stress, and inadequate support from officials and the community. Despite these experiences and challenges, SPED teachers remain committed to delivering inclusive and engaging learning experiences for their students. This study explores at SPED teachers' experiences, focusing on the challenges they face, their coping techniques, and the support they receive in their career. The study will take a phenomenological approach to acquire a better understanding of their problems and the elements that influence their resilience and motivation. Qualitative Method purposively interviewed 7 participants through In-depth interview, analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings of this study provide useful insights into the systemic difficulties affecting SPED teachers, underlining the need for stronger policies, increased resources, and enhanced support systems. Understanding their suffering enables educational institutions, policymakers, and stakeholders to devise methods to increase teacher well-being and retention in special education. Therefore, this study emphasizes the necessity of recognizing and resolving the difficulties that SPED teachers encounter. The study contributes to ongoing efforts to improve special education and provide a more supportive atmosphere for instructors who serve students with special needs by allowing them to express their experiences.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Plight, Special Education, and SPED Teachers

### Introduction:

Education was central to individual evolution and had be a right for all and provided each person with the possibility to fully participate in society, to access the labour market and to develop one's potential (Hammersley, 2024). Ensuring that success meant providing students equal opportunities for learning and development, regardless of ability, race, sex, or religion (Stanich, 2023). Moreover, to ensure success it included special education services in which it could be received in a variety of settings which include general education classrooms, resource classrooms, self-contained classrooms, homes, hospitals, correctional facilities, private schools, residential facilities, and separate schools specifically for those with disabilities (Armstrong, 2024). According to Baglieri & Shapiro(2019), for a school to offer a truly special education services, adaptations might have needed to be made both to the physical spaces within the school to ensure all students were able to access all resources, as well as to the school routines, teaching styles and classroom rules.

On the other hand, most teachers teaching children with learning disabilities did not receive any special needs education training from the school, they feel that they are not qualified to teach the children with learning disability and teachers assigned in SPED classes lack of strategies in dealing with learners with disabilities (Allam & Martin, 2021). Moreover, SPED teachers experience physical and mental demands, excessive responsibilities, and obstacles that hinder their self-fulfilment, leading to harsh and challenging circumstances (Cuadra, 2023).

While international studies have extensively explored the challenges faced by special education teachers, there is a noticeable scarcity of research focusing on the unique experiences of SPED teachers within the Philippine context. Specifically, limited attention has been given to understanding the multifaceted struggles these educators encounter, including inadequate training, resource limitations, and the emotional and physical demands of their roles. This gap underscores the need for localized studies that delve into the lived experiences of Filipino SPED teachers to inform the development of targeted intervention programs aimed at enhancing instructional quality and teacher well-being. Therefore, this study aims to determine the plight of special education teachers in their quest for quality instruction.

### Objectives of the Study

Generally, this study aimed to determine the plight of special education teachers in their quest for quality instruction. Specifically, this paper sought to answer one core question, "What are the experiences and challenges of special education teachers as they journey in the present education system?"

### Methodology

**Research Design.** The researcher utilized qualitative research specifically phenomenological approach. This approach is popularly used to study and describe lived experiences, gain a deeper understanding of how human beings think, and expand a researcher's knowledge about a phenomenon (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022).

**Participants of the Study.** The primary subjects of this research are the five to seven selected SPED teachers with minimum of 3 years of teaching experience in SPED program, bachelor's degree holder in special needs education, numerous number of trainings, and public institution under the school division of Escalante City. Using the Purposive sampling (also known as judgment, selective or subjective sampling) the sampling technique in which researcher relies on his or her own judgment when choosing members of population to participate in the study (Dudovskiy, 2021).

**Instrument.** In this study, a semi-structured interview questionnaire served as the main instrument that was used by the researcher. According to George (2022), a semi-structured interview was a data collection method that relied on asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework, however, the questions were not set in order or in phrasing.

**Data Gathering Procedure.** After the validity of the instrument, the researcher prepared a letter for approval from the Schools Division Superintendent for the conduct of the study. After the approval, the permission was acquired through personal interaction and sought cooperation from the SPED teachers involved and informed about the components that were subject to their personal life, as well as the reason of being a respondent. On the other hand, the In-Depth Interview was utilized the semi-structured interview to gather the necessary data. According to Eeuwijk & Angehrn (2018), an In-Depth interview was a qualitative research method and data collection technique in which a selected group of people discussed a given topic or issue in-depth, facilitated by a professional, external moderator and this method served to solicit participants' attitudes and perceptions, knowledge and experiences, and practices, shared in the course of interaction with different people. Moreover, the researcher secured informed consent and asked concrete questions from the interview guide during the discussion.

**Data Analysis.** After the data gathering procedures, the thematic analysis was used to analyze the results of the study. Nevertheless, thematic analysis was a method for analyzing qualitative data that involved reading through a set of data and looking for patterns in the meaning of the data to find themes, and it was an active process of reflexivity in which the researcher's subjective experience is at the center of making sense of the data (Villegas, 2023).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Qualitative Results**

on the qualitative results of the study, the following themes were derived from the codes used in thematic analysis.

#### ***Theme 1: EXPERIENCES OF SPED TEACHERS IN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM***

##### **A. Curriculum Dilemmas**

Based on the key informants, it was found out that they were implementing Individualized Educational Plan (IEP)SPED that served as their curriculum guide. In which,

Key Informant #1 stated that;

*"there is no curriculum in SPED, instead an IEP or the Individualized Educational Plan that's aligned with the goals and objective of the child"*

Supported by the statement of:

Key Informant #4:

*"depend heavily on the Individualized Education Program (IEP)"*

Key Informant #7:

*"The results, along with the physician's recommendations, become the basis of the teachers in writing the IEP of the child."*

##### **B. Setting the Stage**

Classroom set up involves clear expectations and variety of methods, such as seating arrangements, rules, and consequences. It creates a structured, supportive, and individualized environment that accommodates the unique needs of each student. Furthermore, key informants verbatim are:

Key Informant #1:

*"but when you deal with special education, it has to be like all teacher-led"*

*"there are schools that actually have teacher assistance and apprentices, but only if they reached the maximum number in a class"*

Also, Key Informant #3 added:

*"you can't mix children with different needs"*

And Key Informant #7 said:

*"structured environment that promotes positive behavior and, you know, supports individual needs"*

Key Informant #2:

*"Celebrating small victories and building on them. Overall, it's a continuous learning process for both my students and me."*

C. Teaching with Impact

SPED teachers employ a range of strategies to meet the diverse needs of students. Differentiated instruction was used to tailor individualized lessons, breaking tasks into smaller steps, and engage students with multisensory approaches. Assistive technology supports learning and communication. Positive behavior support encourages appropriate behaviors, and explicit instruction provides clear guidance. Regular progress monitoring ensures that teaching methods are adjusted as needed. These were stated by:

Key Informant #1:

*"with children with special needs – when we say special needs, they need more accommodation"*

Key Informant #2:

*"I have to make activities that are specifically tailored to their unique needs and abilities. It's a very personalized approach."*

*"I have to be creative and constantly assess what works and what doesn't."*

Supported by:

Key Informant #2:

*"I tend to use a mix of multisensory approaches. It's really about finding what clicks for each student."*

Key Informant #4:

*"employ a range of multisensory approaches—visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile—to address different learning styles"*

Others stated that:

Key Informant #5:

*"It's always, like, a challenge to keep things interesting for the students... and for myself too."*

*"as a teacher, we always make sure that, um, the attention of the learner is, like, on task by prompting them from time to time."*

Key Informant #7:

*"I have learned to know the personalities of my students and try my best to match with them. In that way, I am able to make them feel comfortable and increase their interest in the session."*

D. Assessing Differently

Special Education teachers used methods and the findings of therapist or pediatrician to evaluate the unique needs and progress of students. These assessments guide the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), ensuring suited instruction instead of using DepEd standardized assessments. These were mentioned by:

Key Informant #7:

*"Each child is assessed on their first visit using the assessment tool advised by the Developmental Pediatrician."*

Key Informant #1:

*"we have the pre and post assessment and then when they start we have like the assessment"*

Key Informant #2:

*"Assessment is, ahhh, more about observing progress over time rather than relying on traditional tests."*

Supported by the statements of:

Key Informant #7:

*"When it comes to assessment, we utilized a non-standardized assessment tools for different areas. We have tools for expressive language, receptive language, cognitive, fine motor, gross motor, comprehension, reading, mathematics, and ADL."*

Also, some Key Informants mentioned:

Key Informant #1:

*"always the behavioral, their sitting down, their listening skills, their...well behaviors like fidgeting and stamping those are some that we have to get rid of and we assess them according to how frequent it is and the intervals of the time"*

Key Informant #4:

*"The curriculum is often modified to include life skills, basic literacy, and numeracy skills to ensure that students not only meet academic milestones but also gain practical skills they can use in their daily lives."*

Key Informant #7:

*"Personally, bi-yearly assessment is my favorite part because it shows how our kids at the center have grown and have developed new skills."*

*"Reassessment is done every 6 months to make sure the plan is matching the child's needs."*

E. Disciplinary with Purpose

Key Informants used disciplinary actions that focuses on understanding and addressing the root causes of behaviors. Employ strategies such as positive reinforcement, behavior intervention plans, and clear communication to promote appropriate behaviors, instead of punitive measures. The verbatims are:

Key Informant #1:

*"we have the positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, we have the token economy"*

Key Informant #2:

*"I use a lot of positive reinforcement and, you know, visual schedules to help them understand expectations. It's important to be flexible and adapt quickly to their needs."*

Key Informant #4:

*"Positive reinforcement is a major component in managing behavior."*

F. Case-Centric Education

Developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Key Informants' approaches to meet specific educational and behavioral goals. Handled students diagnosed with various disabilities, such as ADHD, ADD, GDD, learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, and physical impairments. Furthermore, the verbatims are:

Key Informant #1:

*"deal with children who have behavioral issues like for example children with ADHD, ADD, GDD – those are some children very common autism"*

*"he has ADHD so he stands up every 3 to 4 minutes"*

Also, it was mentioned by:

Key Informant #7:

*"children with autism when routine is established"*

Key Informant #3:

*"especially since they are deaf and mute pupils"*

Key Informant #1:

*"But when we deal with children with gifted...children who are gifted like their IQs are way higher that of their ages"*

G. Behavior Matters

Key Informants observed a diverse range of student behaviors, often influenced by individual disabilities and learning needs. A learner is not interested if seen with these behaviors. The verbatims are:

Key Informant #1:

*"very basic that children with behavioral needs won't sit and just stare at you for like five minutes"*

*"cases like that a child may get bored in the classroom if he gets to experience teachings and lessons that are way too low for him"*

Moreover, the way learners were arranged also affects learning. Stated by:

Key Informant #1:

*"teacher decides to shuffle or rearrange the classroom, children will basically have tantrums because the place will be new for them, they arrangement will be new for them"*

Key Informant #2:

*"classroom management, it's, like, a different ballgame. Each student has their own triggers"*

## Theme 2: CHALLENGES FACED BY SPED TEACHERS

### A. Resources Scarcity

Key Informants often face resource scarcity, impacting their ability to effectively support students with diverse needs. Limited access to specialized materials, assistive technologies, and adequate classroom space can hinder instructional effectiveness. Additionally, high student-to-teacher ratios and insufficient professional development opportunities may further challenge SPED teachers. The verbatim are:

Key Informant #3

*"One major difficulty has been the limited training I received, which, well, often left me feeling unprepared to address the diverse needs of my pupils."*

Also, Key Informant #4:

*"I've faced obstacles like limited resources"*

Additionally, it was mentioned by:

Key Informant #3:

*"I've also got tasks to complete for my master's degree, which, you know, requires a lot of focus and dedication"*

### B. Parental Factors

Parental involvement is a crucial factor in the success of special education teachers and their students. Key Informants were struggling on the part of the parents who are in denial. It was stated by:

Key Informant #1:

*"the most challenging part of being a sped teacher are the parents especially when in denial stage like there's pretty much evidence that your child has this"*

Supported by the statements of:

Key Informant #2:

*"One of the biggest hurdles is when parents, you know, don't follow up on their children's progress or needs at home"*

Also, it was mentioned by:

Key Informant #6:

*"Getting parents and other caregivers involved in their children's education can be, um, challenging, especially if they are facing their own, you know, challenges"*

### C. Physical Changes

Key Informants experience physical bruises as a result of managing challenging behaviors exhibited by students. This was stated by:

Key Informant #7:

*"I would go home with bruises and bleeding wounds almost every day."*

Supported by the statements of:

Key Informant #4:

*"being a SPED teacher can be physically demanding"*

Key Informant #7:

*"as a teacher whose size is that of a child, it has been a challenge for me to deal with aggressive children bigger than me"*

D. Administrative Pressure

Key Informants faced significant pressure from the higher ups, balancing compliance with extensive documentation and individualized student needs. The verbatims are:

Key Informant #5:

*"the administrative pressures can, uh, hinder the flexibility and creativity needed to be an effective SPED teacher"*

*"I have, you know, faced some challenges. Uh, feeling pressured towards work is, um, definitely one of them. I mean, based on my experience... I've encountered, like, different types of administration."*

Also, supported by the statements of:

Key Informant #4

*"One of the big things on my plate right now is, um, accomplishing all the paperwork for the IPCRF."*

Key Informant #6

*"You know, just trying to, uh, keep everything balanced. It's, uh, been a bit hectic lately with all the, um, school activities and, uh, lesson planning."*

E. Teaching Challenges

Key Informants faced numerous teaching challenges as they strive to meet the diverse needs of their students. They must adapt curricula to accommodate various learning disabilities, behavioral challenges, and emotional needs while ensuring that each student progresses toward their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals. This requires creativity, patience, and flexibility, as well as the ability to manage a classroom with varying levels of ability and behavior. These were stated by:

Key informant #6:

*"Effective SPED instruction often requires, you know, close collaboration with general education instructors, therapists, and counselors. It's crucial but, um, not always easy."*

Key Informant #3

*"quite busy with school activities and tasks. You know, I'm juggling things like intramurals and, um, making grades for my pupils. It's, like, a lot to handle sometimes"*

Also, it was mentioned by:

Key Informant #4:

*"Balancing this with teaching and, well, everything else can be a challenge."*

Key Informant #2:

*"challenging to maintain a balance that keeps everyone engaged and calm"*

Theme 3: COPING STRATEGIES

A. Emotional Coping

Key Informants' were frequently engaged in reflective practices, such as journaling or peer discussions, to process emotions and build emotional resilience. They also prioritized establishing supportive relationships with colleagues to share experiences and gain emotional support. The verbatims are:

Key Informant #3:

*"I actively seek out, you know, online and offline resources to enhance my skills. Collaborating with experienced colleagues has really, um, allowed me to deepen my understanding of effective communication strategies and, you know, teaching techniques."*

Key Informant #4

*"reminding me of the power of resilience, compassion, and the joy of, you know, seeing my pupils succeed."*

**B. Cognitive Coping**

Key Informants often utilized problem-solving techniques and goal-setting strategies to manage cognitive stress and enhance their teaching effectiveness. They also engaged in continuous learning and professional development to adapt to challenges and improved their instructional approaches. The verbatims are:

**Key Informant #4:**

*"I often must be resourceful when it comes to the lack of specialized materials. I create my own teaching aids using inexpensive or recycled materials, adapting everyday objects into sensory tools or learning aids."*

**Key Informant #1:**

*"Then, all of the subject teachers will sit together and then share their observations. You connect the dots and see that those are red flags."*

The qualitative findings show that SPED instructors' experiences are heavily influenced by the requirement for individualized, flexible, and responsive instructional techniques, which contrasts sharply with the generic, standardized practices commonly seen in mainstream education. Teachers work in systems that are not completely equipped to accommodate their students' individual needs, resulting in recurring curriculum challenges, resource constraints, and administrative barriers. The use of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) as the core curriculum emphasizes the importance of individualized education, continuous assessment, and adaptive teaching practices to meet students' various skills and behavioral profiles with special needs.

Classroom environments are methodically designed to promote pleasant behavior and learning, but instructors continue to confront obstacles owing to a lack of specialized resources, physical and emotional demands, and insufficient professional development opportunities. Parental engagement appears as both an important support and a considerable barrier, particularly when parents battle with denial or are unable to promote educational aspirations at home.

Behavior management is a constant problem, requiring SPED teachers to use positive reinforcement, behavior intervention programs, and flexible communication approaches rather than punitive measures. The teachers' responsibilities extend beyond academic instruction to include case management for a wide range of disabilities, continuing evaluation with non-standardized techniques, and curriculum customization to prioritize life skills alongside academic progress.

Despite these challenges, SPED teachers demonstrate resilience and adaptation through a variety of coping mechanisms. They practice emotional self-care, peer cooperation, reflective practice, and creative problem solving. The pressures of administrative documentation, high student-to-teacher ratios, and physical hazards are countered by the professional gratification gained from seeing student progress and achievements.

This synthesis identifies a significant gap in structural support: SPED teachers are expected to provide highly customized, holistic instruction within restrictive, underfunded systems. Their lived experiences highlight the critical need for policies, training, and resources that acknowledge the complexities and demands of special education, ensuring that both children and teachers have the support they require to thrive.

**Conclusion and recommendation**

The study highlights that SPED teachers face significant challenges, including limited resources, complex teaching demands, and administrative pressures. Addressing these issues is essential for improving the effectiveness of special education and ensuring positive outcomes for students with special needs.

To address the challenges identified in the study, it is recommended that educational institutions and policymakers prioritize enhanced professional development and allocate additional resources for SPED teachers. This includes investing in continuous training programs on innovative instructional strategies, such as differentiated instruction and the use of assistive technology, as well as establishing mentorship opportunities and collaborative learning communities for teachers to share best practices. Schools should advocate for increased funding and create resource-sharing networks within districts to ensure consistent access to specialized materials and classroom support. Additionally, a comprehensive screening and assessment framework should be implemented, in collaboration with healthcare professionals, to facilitate early identification and intervention for students with developmental challenges. Streamlining administrative processes through digital platforms can reduce paperwork and free up time for instruction, while equipping classrooms with appropriate safety tools and providing regular training on crisis management will help ensure a secure learning environment. Parental involvement should be strengthened through educational workshops, support groups, and scheduled consultations to foster strong home-school partnerships. Finally, establishing a dedicated helpline and counseling services for SPED teachers can provide timely assistance

and emotional support, ultimately empowering educators and enhancing educational outcomes for students with special needs.

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