

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION STUDENT TEACHERS IN HANDLING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of physical education student teachers with the inclusion of children with special needs in their physical education classes. The study employed Colaizzi's method of phenomenology. Student teachers in Physical Education handling students with special needs were the participants of the study and were chosen through purposive sampling. Findings revealed 3 themes and 7 subthemes emerged, which explore the lived experiences of Physical Education student teachers. The results underscore that classroom management, adapting instructional strategies, and adjusting to the environment are key challenges faced by student teachers in inclusive educational settings, the importance of cooperation and support from cooperating teachers and co-student teachers in guiding student teachers through the complexities of teaching students with diverse needs and the significant of specialized training and seminars in equipping student teachers with the necessary skills to cater to students with special needs.

Keywords: *physical education, student teachers, special needs*

INTRODUCTION

Schools and universities around the world have increasingly recognized that inclusive education is essential for equity and student development. Recent research indicates that physical education (PE) teachers often face significant challenges in adapting instruction for students with special needs, leading to gaps in engagement and outcomes. For example, a study of Physical Education teachers' self-efficacy toward teaching students with autism found that lack of specialized training and experience strongly predicted lower confidence levels, resulting in reduced participation (Alhumaid et al., 2021).

Similar issues are emerging in educational institutions in the Philippines, where inclusive education policies under DepEd emphasize integration but often lack support in Physical Education settings. A phenomenological study of seven PE teachers revealed lived experiences marked by commitment to inclusion yet hindered by inadequate training, resource shortages, and the need for adaptive strategies (Montecino & Bernaldez, 2024). Likewise, a Heideggerian inquiry into millennial Physical Education teachers' praxis in mainstreamed settings which revealed challenges like contextual barriers and the demand for differentiated instruction amid limited competencies (Tanucan, 2019). These studies suggest that while awareness of special needs is growing, practical implementation in Philippine Physical Education varies widely.

Despite these insights, several gaps remain. First, many studies focus on in-service teachers' challenges rather than the unique lived experiences of Physical Education student teachers during practicum, who navigate real-time responsibilities without full experience. Second, few explore intra-institutional or regional differences, such as how student teacher education programs shape these experiences through mentorship or local resources. Third, there is limited longitudinal

examination of emotional coping, professional growth, and policy enforcement specific to student teachers handling special needs. These gaps limit targeted improvements in pre-service Physical Education training.

Because of these gaps, it is essential to conduct a study to explore on the lived experiences of student teachers handling students with special needs. This study also contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by helping ensure that learning environments are safe and inclusive.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of physical education student teachers with the inclusion of children with special needs in their classes. This study also explored their confidence and preparedness in applying the theories they learn from the classroom to the real-world of teaching and the strategies they employ to cater to the needs of their students.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study employed the phenomenological descriptive research, also known as a descriptive phenomenology design, is an approach that investigates the first-hand experiences of an individual regarding a particular phenomenon (Frechette, 2020). Polit and Beck (2013) posit that phenomenology is characteristically exploratory and descriptive, and the intention is not to create a generalization of findings but a deeper understanding of the experiences from the perspective of the study participants.

Participants. The participants of the study were the physical education student teachers handling students with special needs in their student teaching internship. The study participants were selected purposively based on the inclusion criteria and the phenomenon being studied. Purposive or judgmental sampling is a type of non-probability sampling that is based on the belief that the researcher's knowledge about the population can be used to hand-pick sample members (Polit & Beck, 2013). Although subjective in manner, purposive sampling is frequently used in qualitative research such as this, as individuals may be chosen based on the inclusion criteria and at the same time perceived to be knowledgeable of the phenomenon to be studied.

Research Instrument. This study utilized a semi-structured interview as the sole instrument for gathering data. Open-ended, English-language guide questions are used to extract important statements from the participants. The purpose of these inquiries is to clarify the matter under investigation. An audio recorder was used to automatically capture the interviews. The researcher also utilized a journal to record observations and notes made throughout the interview.

Data Analysis. The analysis employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore and understand the lived experiences of the participants. The data were analyzed using the seven-step method developed by Paul Colaizzi (1978), which provides a rigorous and systematic framework for interpreting qualitative data while remaining faithful to participants' original accounts. Interview transcripts were first read repeatedly to achieve familiarization. Significant statements related to the phenomenon were then extracted, and meanings were formulated while remaining grounded in the participants' original accounts. These meanings were organized into thematic clusters, which formed the basis for developing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. The description was then refined into its fundamental structure to capture its core essence. The findings were returned to the participants for validation to ensure credibility and accuracy of interpretation.

Ethical Consideration. Throughout the investigation, the researcher upheld rigorous ethical standards by safeguarding participants' identities and privacy, assigning unique codes to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, securely storing copies on password-protected computers, and allowing participants ample uninterrupted opportunities to share their

stories, consistent with Scheef and Buyserie's (2020) approach to anonymizing data through personal information removal.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After a meticulous analysis of the transcripts, the researcher identified key emergent themes that captured the essence of the participants' lived experiences.

Challenges of the Student Teachers

The first theme captures the challenges faced by the student teachers. Some participants share their struggles in handling the students while delivering quality instruction and appropriate strategies, especially for the LSENS students in the classroom. After their in-depth interviews, the participants typically expressed similar opinions regarding their issues. Most of the participants admitted to having difficulty with classroom management and having difficulty adjusting to their environment outside the classroom.

Under this first emergent theme are three sub-themes, namely: a) classroom management; b) adapting instructional strategies; and c) adjusting to a new environment.

Classroom Management

This theme illustrates the student teachers' struggles with managing student behaviors. Classroom management is an important aspect of effective teaching that encompasses various strategies and techniques to create a conducive learning environment for students. It involves establishing routines, setting expectations, and maintaining a positive and organized classroom atmosphere to optimize student learning and engagement. Effective classroom management is essential for promoting student participation, minimizing disruptions, and fostering a supportive and productive learning environment. In the context of a classroom where students with special needs are present, teachers may struggle if they lack exposure to special-needs classrooms, making it challenging to adapt to the unique needs of these students. Participants shared that,

"It is very difficult especially during my first week as a student teacher since I have 2 students with special needs. They have different cases so sometimes I am loss of what to do with them so that they will not affect the other students. My patience was tested at that time. I have a hard time during that day when they both throw tantrums" (P2)

"I find it very challenging especially since it's my first time handling these kinds of students. I have this student who keeps on roaming around and will distract his classmates." (P4)

"When I was holding a class, I was not aware of how the students with special needs behave in my class. That student will be triggered if you mention the color yellow since he will always associate it with a bus that is color yellow and he is obsessed with yellow. And he will talk and talk about it over and over again. It's a challenge for me since at first I don't know what to do and how to react" (P5)

The participants' responses underscore that it requires specialized skills in creating tailored lesson plans and addressing individual needs. These findings align with Apriliyanti (2023), who emphasized that teachers face substantial challenges in inclusive settings with special needs students, such as adapting English instruction to behavioral issues, limited resources, and lack of training, necessitating personalized strategies and collaboration to maintain classroom harmony. Similarly, Mokano and Letuma (2025) asserted that no matter a student's disability profile, teachers play a crucial role in managing disciplinary issues like disengagement, bullying, and tantrums through targeted interventions and understanding contextual triggers.

Adapting Instructional Strategies

One of the difficulty shared by the participants is developing and implementing differentiated instruction that meets the diverse needs of all students. Student teachers must learn to adapt their teaching methods and materials on the fly, which can be particularly difficult without prior experience. As participants shared,

"I have to prepare and modify different activities for the two of them because of their different learning styles and behavior and at the same time I also have to prepare activities for the majority of my students." (P2)

"Preparing different activities for a class is quite draining and exhausting most of the time. I have to consider everyone in the class so that they will learn the lesson very well." (P1)

"I have to modify the activities that will suit their needs and interests. I learned to adapt to the different instructional strategies just to make sure I deliver the lesson well" (P4)

The participants' responses underscore that handling students with special needs in the classroom requires the implementation of various instructional strategies designed to accommodate diverse learning styles, needs, and abilities. These findings align with Massey (2025), who emphasized that teachers are responsible for achieving inclusive education, as they must organize the educational response, design and develop personalized educational practices, motivate students, work collaboratively, and use different resources and technologies. Similarly, Marlina (2019) asserted that no matter a student's background, ability, or identity, teachers play a crucial part in embracing and instructing them.

Adjusting to the new environment

Another challenge faced by the participants is the new learning environment, where they handle actual students, and they have to familiarize themselves with the school's facilities and routines, building relationships with faculty members and students, understanding school policies and procedures, and collaborating with their cooperating teachers to plan activities for the term. Participants shared that;

"Although I was already exposed to demonstration teaching during my stay in college as a student, it was still a culture shock for me when I was deployed in the field. It was very different from what I was used to before. We don't have students with special needs during practice demonstrations, so it's very new to me" (P1)

"It was a challenge since when I was just a student, I don't usually have 7 am classes. When I was in the field, I had to be very early and I was also the last to go home" (P3)

Based on the participants' response, it is evident that they have culture shock when they enter the real classroom setting. These emphasizes that the transition from simulated to real-world demands as overwhelming for novices. These findings align with Rutherford (2015), who emphasized that new teachers are responsible for navigating inclusive education transitions, as they must organize personal adjustments, build collegial relationships, master school systems and procedures, and collaborate effectively with mentors while focusing on student-centered learning. Similarly, Kutsyuruba et al. (2024) stated that no matter a new teacher's prior exposure, they play a crucial role in embracing school culture, routines, and diverse student needs through structured support and autonomy.

Cooperation and Support

In this theme, student teachers cooperate with one another, with their cooperating teachers, as this is essential for a successful and enriching student teaching experience. Two themes encompass these emergent themes. These are: a) Guidance from the cooperating teachers; and b) support from co-student teachers.

Guidance from the Cooperating Teachers

The participants share that their cooperating teachers guide and support them throughout the internship. They provide valuable feedback, share their expertise, and help the student teacher navigate the challenges of classroom teaching. Participants share that,

“Through the help of my cooperating teacher, I was able to adjust to the students’ behavior in the classroom, especially the students with special needs, since he was able to give me tips on how to handle them. Aside from that, I got to know the students since they were the ones who were with the students the longest” (P2)

“My cooperating teacher helps me whenever I cannot handle the student, especially during tantrums” (P3)

“She guides me on what to do if the behavior of my student changes. Later, I was able to handle his tantrums so that the whole class would not be compromised” (P4)

Based on the participants’ response, it is evident that their cooperating teachers provided essential guidance, feedback, and practical tips throughout the internship, particularly in managing students with special needs behaviors like tantrums, enabling student teachers to adjust strategies and maintain classroom flow without compromise. These aligns with the study of Staton et al. (2023), who emphasized that cooperating teachers are responsible for achieving effective student teaching experiences, as they must organize mentorship responses, design collaborative lesson practices, share student insights from long-term observation, intervene during behavioral challenges, and model adaptive instructional techniques. Additionally, Duquette (1994) found that no matter a student teacher's prior preparation, cooperating teachers play a crucial role in embracing and instructing novices through advisory support, real-time problem-solving, and gradual authority sharing.

Support from co-student teachers

The support and collaboration between co-student teachers during the teaching internship help the participants make the internship journey meaningful. They collaborate in creating and sharing lesson plans, instructional materials, and resources. Participants shared that they learn from each other's ideas while saving time and effort. As the participant shared,

“We share our experiences especially if we happen to handle the same student. Although I am handling PE, I can learn from them also how they handle students with special needs. And I can apply it to my class. Not only this but on how to make the lesson engaging and active. Aside from the student teachers from other majors, I always have support from my co-majors. We are helping each other too.” (P1)

“They are the best! They help me whenever I have so many things to do and they are free, they offer their help so that I can do my work faster. They also share what they do in their class with the students. It’s fun being a student teacher” (P3)

Based on the participant’s opinion, it is evident that that helping each other is very important in the field of teaching. They were able to pull off the spirit of bayanihan to help one another achieve their dreams which is to become a teacher. These findings align with Roncarelli and Barry (2022), who emphasized that teachers are responsible for achieving effective internships, as they must organize collaborative responses, design shared lesson practices, exchange cross-disciplinary insights on student behaviors, motivate peers, work collectively, and leverage pooled resources for inclusive instruction. Also, Wullschleger et al. (2025) asserted that no matter a student teacher's major or prior experience, peer collaborations

play a crucial role in embracing diverse classroom challenges and elevating instructional quality through joint planning and reflection.

Trainings and Seminars

In this theme, the participants suggest for additional trainings and workshops to stay on the current policies and best practices in inclusive education. This helps them provide evidence-based instruction and accommodations tailored to each student's needs. Two themes emerge from this theme. These are: a) Trainings and Seminars in inclusive education; and b) Inclusion of inclusive education in the Bachelor of Physical Education Curriculum.

Trainings and Seminars in Inclusive Education

Aside from the trainings from the four years in the bachelor program, the participants shared that attending seminars and workshop would further enhance their skills, strategies, and behaviour management techniques in handling students with special needs. As participants shared,

It is better to have proper training on how to handle these students because they are sometimes difficult to handle especially when they have tantrums” (P2)

“Since it was my first time handling such special needs, I feel that I have to undergo training in terms of strategies and how to properly handle them” (P4)

Based on the participants' response, it is evident that trainings and seminars in handling students with special needs is important as they are the students that need extra additional attention in the classroom to also ensure that they receive the learnings that they deserve. This could be linked on the study of Anora et al. (2025) who found that special education teachers need targeted professional development to optimize competencies in Individualized Education Program (IEP) implementation, particularly in adapting instruction to students' disabilities and diverse profiles. Access to customized lesson planning, adaptive strategies, and support programs is essential for students with special needs to grow and develop, especially in developing all their potential to be ready for an independent life.

Inclusion of inclusive education in the Bachelor of Physical Education (BPEd) Curriculum

The participants shared that inclusive education should be strengthen in the BPEd Curriculum as it prepare aspiring teachers specializing in physical education to deliver and manage instruction, assessment, and research in physical literacy. While the program focuses on developing competent physical education teacher-researchers, it does not explicitly mention the inclusion of inclusive education in the curriculum. They shared that,

“It is better if there is a separate subject in the curriculum that focuses on handling students with special needs so that we already have an idea of how they are in the classroom so that when we are in the field we face such students, at least we already have an idea on how to handle them” (P1)

“Handling them is very challenging so I felt that it should be taught in the curriculum although it was integrated in other major subjects but it is different if we focused on the individual needs of the students” (P4)

From the participants' perspective, it is evident that it is important to put emphasis on inclusive education as early as their formation years so that already have an idea of how to handle these students. These findings align with Mejarito and Laborte (2025), who emphasized that teachers are responsible for achieving inclusive education, as they must organize the educational response, design and develop personalized educational practices, motivate students, work collaboratively, and use different resources and technologies in physical education setting.

CONCLUSION

Based on the result, the researcher concludes that physical education student teachers face significant challenges in classroom management, adapting instructional strategies, and adjusting to new environments while handling students with special needs. These student teachers emphasize the importance of specialized skills for creating tailored lesson plans, modifying activities, and addressing individual behaviors like tantrums and triggers. They also recognize the value of guidance from cooperating teachers, collaboration with co-student teachers, flexibility, adaptability, and patience in fostering inclusive physical education settings. Additionally, the crucial support of cooperating teachers, peer student teachers, and calls for curriculum integration has been instrumental in helping student teachers navigate diverse learner needs during internships. Thus, it is recommended that teacher education programs provide specialized training and seminars on inclusive practices, foster collaborative relationships among student teachers and mentors, integrate dedicated subjects on special needs into the BPED curriculum, and promote institutional support to effectively create a responsive, inclusive educational environment where every aspiring teacher and student can thrive.

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