



Behavior Management in Special Education Settings: A Phenomenology

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Abstract

Effective behavior management is crucial for fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments in special education settings. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the experiences of educators in managing behavior within the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (SSHJM) institution during the 2023-2024 school year. The research aims to identify key challenges, strategies, and best practices in classroom behavior management. Guided by an atheoretical stance and various philosophical assumptions, the study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the essence of educators' experiences. Seven special education teachers from SSHJM participated in open-ended interviews, sharing their insights on behavior management. The data were analyzed using content analysis, revealing six main themes: behavior management experience, SSHJM behavior management, specific behavioral challenges, behavior management strategies, barriers and facilitators at SSHJM, and practices for behavior management enhancement. The findings highlight the importance of flexibility, intensive training, classroom inclusivity, collaboration, and evidence-based strategies in addressing the complex needs of students with special needs. The study culminates in a compendium of best practices for behavior management, offering practical guidance for educators and administrators. Recommendations for future research and practice emphasize the need for tailored support plans, continuous professional development, collaborative approaches, optimal resource allocation, and inclusive learning environments. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on behavior management in special education, ultimately aiming to enhance student outcomes and support for learners with diverse needs.

Keywords: Behavior Management, Special Education, Inclusive Learning Environments, Educator Strategies

Introduction

Creating an inclusive and nurturing learning environment is a key goal in education, particularly in special education settings where tailored support is crucial for students with diverse needs (Massoumeh & Jamshidi, 2012; Bunghanoy & Sumalinog, 2023). This qualitative study explores behavior management within the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, where specialized education intersects with values-based learning.

Behavior management in special education is essential for fostering an inclusive school environment. Understanding these challenges helps educators, administrators, and stakeholders implement effective strategies and policies that promote holistic development (Chitiyo et al., 2017; Sumalinog, 2019). The commitment of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary to holistic education, which includes addressing behavioral challenges, underscores the complexity of this task.

This study aims to illuminate the factors influencing behavior management in this unique setting, emphasizing the importance of individualized approaches. By capturing the experiences of educators and those involved in behavior management, the research seeks to identify barriers, successes, and evolving strategies. The goal is to inform best practices, enhance policies, and contribute to broader discussions on effective behavior management in special education.

Addressing behavioral issues in special education not only improves educational techniques but also informs global policy-making, professional development, and educational research. The study highlights the necessity of ongoing research in behavior management, especially in the post-pandemic era, where students face new challenges due to disruptions in routines and learning environments (Davis, 2021). The findings aim to guide best practices and improve policies within the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and similar contexts worldwide.

Methodology

This study uses a phenomenological research design, a descriptive qualitative approach rooted in the philosophical tradition of interpreting human experiences, drawing on the works of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre. This method is well-suited to exploring the essence of experiences related to behavior management within the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary institution (Errasti-Ibarrondo et al., 2018). The approach aims to uncover recurring themes and patterns in participants' statements, providing a comprehensive depiction of their experiences with behavior management.



Environment

The Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary School, located in the Philippines, is dedicated to academic excellence and social inclusiveness. Founded in the mid-20th century, the school has become a beacon for students from diverse backgrounds, especially in special education. The school supports learners with various disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, Cerebral Palsy, autism spectrum disorder, and Down syndrome, aiming to foster independence and community integration.

Research Participants and Instrument

The study uses convenience sampling, involving seven educators with experience in teaching special education during the 2023-2024 school year. Participants include both male and female teachers with at least two years of special education experience. This approach was chosen due to the limited availability of teachers for the study.

The primary research instrument is the researcher, using an open-ended questionnaire for interviews. This allows participants to freely express their views and experiences, providing rich, nuanced data. The interview questions are divided into three sections: Developmental Questions, Probing Questions, and Concluding Questions, with a total of seven items.

Data Gathering

The data gathering for this study was meticulously planned and executed to ensure validity and reliability. The process began with a pre-data gathering phase, which included a discussion of the research writing process to establish a common understanding of the study's scope and objectives. Following this, three potential research titles were submitted to the Dean for consideration. Approval for a research adviser was then sought, and the study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for ethical approval. Once IRB approval was obtained, the researcher sought and received permission from the school principal and obtained informed consent from all participants.

Actual data gathering involved scheduling and conducting interviews, both online and in-person. Interviews were scheduled outside of work hours or during break times to minimize disruption. Online interviews were conducted for those unavailable for in-person meetings, while in-person interviews were held in private rooms at the school. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and was recorded only with the participant's consent. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Post-data gathering, data was managed by taking detailed notes and, where permitted, recording the interviews. Data was stored securely and transcribed for analysis, with raw data being deleted one year after data collection began.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis, a method that involves systematically examining and interpreting textual and audio materials to uncover themes and patterns. The process began with the acquisition and preparation of data, followed by a precise definition of research objectives. Units of analysis were determined based on the interviews, and themes were created from the data. The coded data was then thoroughly analyzed to identify emerging themes related to behavior management challenges in special education settings. Patterns, similarities, and differences were scrutinized to evaluate and refine the identified themes.

This systematic approach aimed to interpret themes that disclose the difficulties in managing behavior in special education settings. By organizing data into significant themes, the study sought to provide a detailed understanding of the multifaceted issues faced by educators. The findings were then validated through consultation with the research participants to ensure accuracy and credibility. Content analysis allowed for a comprehensive exploration of behavior management challenges, offering valuable insights that could guide practical responses and inform best practices in special education environments.

Results

Theme 1: Behavior Management Experience

The first theme examines the multifaceted experiences of behavior management in special education settings, exploring the approaches, challenges, and successes encountered by teachers, staff, and students. Teaching special education (SPED) learners requires flexibility, adaptability, and a strict behavior management plan, with one participant emphasizing the need to constantly adjust strategies to meet evolving classroom dynamics. Another noted that effective behavior management often necessitates collaboration with caregivers and behavior therapists, as managing a class alone can be overwhelming, particularly with aggressive behaviors. Participants highlighted the necessity of intensive and comprehensive training before teaching SPED classes, covering various behavior management aspects such as understanding learning styles and implementing evidence-based strategies. This need has become more critical post-pandemic due to increased behavioral issues among students. Creating an inclusive classroom environment is essential, with teachers adjusting classrooms to meet diverse student needs and employing individualized approaches to cater to different learning preferences and abilities. This involves differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to enhance the learning experience. Effective behavior management also requires a holistic approach, addressing intellectual, emotional, physical, and social needs, and establishing clear procedures and expectations to provide a structured and supportive learning environment.



Participants expressed concerns that special education is not given adequate importance in the Philippines, citing a lack of awareness, training, and institutional support for effective behavior management in SPED settings. All participants agreed that the Philippine educational system needs significant improvements to better support special education.

Theme 2: SSHJM Behavior Management

Theme 2 delves into the specific behavior management strategies employed at the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (SSHJM), investigating their theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and empirical evidence. It analyzes behavior modification techniques and social skills development principles, aiming to demonstrate how SSHJM strategies effectively promote positive behavior and enhance social interactions among special education students. Additionally, it highlights the importance of teachers' personal attributes—such as patience, flexibility, and a profound understanding of each learner's unique needs—in managing behavior. These qualities help teachers navigate diverse learning styles and behavioral challenges, allowing them to adapt strategies based on individual or group dynamics and tailor instruction and support to enable student success. The theme also underscores the significant impact of caretaker involvement in behavior management. Establishing clear and consistent rules for both learners and caretakers ensures a collaborative and supportive environment. By informing caretakers about classroom expectations, a cohesive partnership between home and school is fostered, reinforcing positive behavior and enhancing the overall educational experience for special education students. The goal is to provide valuable insights for educators and practitioners on integrating SSHJM methods into behavior management interventions within special education settings.

Theme 3: Specific Behavioral Challenges

The third theme delves into the intricate realm of behavioral issues encountered in special education settings, aiming to provide a comprehensive analysis of the diverse challenges faced by teachers and support personnel when assisting students with special needs. By examining empirical data, case studies, and practical strategies, this theme seeks to enhance understanding of specific behavioral issues and offer effective methods for addressing them. Such understanding can help educators and support staff tailor interventions and support services to each student's unique requirements, fostering positive outcomes and promoting inclusive learning environments. Special education students often exhibit tendencies such as communication difficulties, attention and focus issues, emotional regulation challenges, resistance to change, academic frustration, hyperactivity, aggression, and dependence on routines. These challenges require careful consideration and individualized approaches. Non-verbal students, for instance, may exhibit aggression as a form of communication, necessitating alternative communication methods like non-verbal cues or assistive devices. Sensory overload is another common issue, with students struggling to concentrate and behave appropriately due to sensory processing difficulties. Implementing sensory-friendly strategies based on individual sensory profiles can help create a more supportive learning environment.

Teachers of special education students often face significant challenges related to limited resources and time constraints, which can impede the implementation of effective teaching strategies and individualized attention. Many teachers feel unsupported in their efforts without adequate resources, guidance, and training, leading to feelings of frustration and being overwhelmed. Flexibility in teaching methods is essential, as teachers must adapt their approaches based on the evolving needs of each student, ensuring that instructional strategies align with individual learning styles and preferences. Consistent support for students as they manage their behaviors is crucial, involving behavioral interventions, collaboration with support staff, and fostering a positive and inclusive classroom culture. Creating a classroom environment where students feel intelligent and heard involves recognizing and valuing their unique strengths, providing opportunities for self-expression, and ensuring their voices are respected. By intentionally designing a supportive and responsive classroom environment, teachers can help special education students feel more engaged, understood, and capable.

Theme 4: Behavior Management Strategies

This theme explores a variety of behavior control techniques used in special education settings, encompassing evidence-based strategies and practical approaches to manage behavioral challenges effectively. It includes proactive techniques like structured routines and positive behavior reinforcement, as well as reactive approaches such as crisis de-escalation and conflict resolution systems. The objective is to provide a comprehensive set of behavior management strategies, integrating empirical research and real-world experiences, to foster inclusive and supportive learning environments. A multifaceted approach is essential, involving collaboration with special education experts, speech therapists, and occupational therapists to guide tailored interventions. A structured and consistent learning environment, emphasized by participants P1, P2, P4, and P6, includes visual supports and environmental modifications to enhance accessibility. Positive and encouraging language contributes to the students' emotional well-being. Task breaks and self-regulation methods empower students to manage their behavior, and flexible opportunities for engagement add inclusivity. Offering options that cater to diverse learning styles and preferences addresses the unique needs of each student. Implementing reward systems and positive reinforcement mechanisms, such as the "First & Then" technique, further reinforces desired behaviors and creates a motivating atmosphere. Additionally, chunking large tasks reduces cognitive load, making tasks more manageable. Participant P5 highlighted the need for a crisis prevention and intervention strategy, stressing the importance of regular and rigorous Crisis Prevention Training for all service providers. Combining these strategies enables educators to create an environment



that addresses behavioral challenges and promotes overall well-being and academic success. According to participants P3 and P4, the synergy of positive behavior support, collaboration with experts, structured learning environments, and inclusive teaching methods ensures a holistic approach that meets the diverse needs of every learner. These comprehensive behavior management strategies are crucial for establishing inclusive and supportive learning environments, benefiting both students and educators.

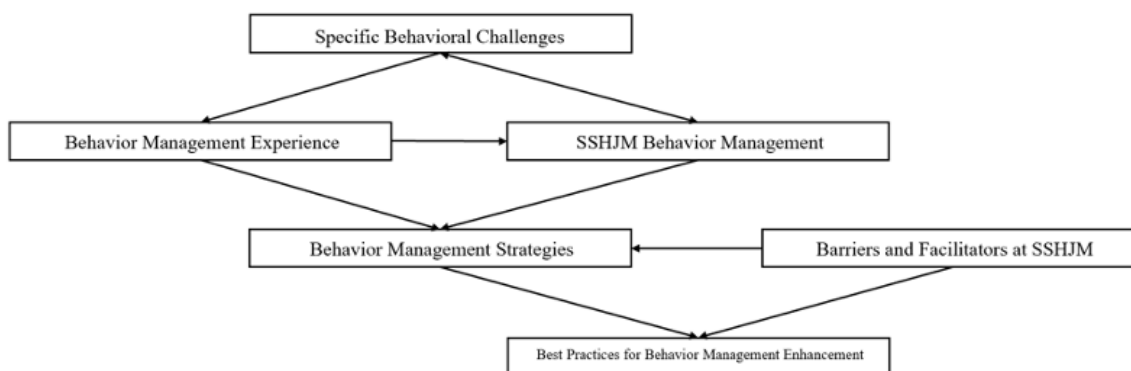
Theme 5: Barriers and Facilitators at SSHJM

The fifth theme delves into the dynamic interactions between facilitators and barriers at SSHJM, with a focus on behavior management in special education settings. The goal is to examine the elements that may hinder or enhance the effectiveness of SSHJM strategies. This theme offers a nuanced understanding of implementation complexities by exploring facilitators such as supportive school climates, stakeholder collaboration, and evidence-based practices, alongside barriers like resource limitations, lack of training, and systemic challenges. Schools often encounter challenges such as insufficient resources, inadequate training, inconsistent use of effective strategies, diverse student needs, and poor collaboration among stakeholders. A significant issue is the absence of clear rewards or consequences for behavior, hindering the creation of a positive environment. Limited space and resources further challenge teachers in providing adequate support to all students. Insufficient teacher training to address diverse student needs exacerbates these issues. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts to provide better teacher training, ensure consistent use of effective strategies, and promote collaboration among education stakeholders. By tackling these obstacles, schools can become more supportive and inclusive environments for both teachers and students.

Theme 6: Practices for Behavior Management Enhancement

This theme explores effective behavior management strategies in special education settings, aiming to promote positive behavior and improve outcomes for children with diverse learning difficulties. It integrates expert suggestions, empirical research, and real-world experiences to provide evidence-based strategies for educators and support staff. Key practices include creating a welcoming learning environment, understanding each student's unique needs, and building trust, as emphasized by participants P1 and P2. P5 highlighted the importance of crisis prevention and intervention plans, underscoring the need for "Handle with Care" Crisis Prevention Training for educators. P3 stressed the necessity of individualized education plans (IEPs) with Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) and maintaining school consistency to create a stable learning environment. Continuous professional development, differentiated instruction, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) accommodate diverse learning styles, according to P4 and P6. Parental involvement fosters a collaborative approach to education, and integrating technology enhances learning, preparing students for the digital age, as noted by P3. The goal is to create an inclusive environment where each student feels valued and supported throughout their educational journey.

Discussion



The Behavior Management Experience of teachers in SPED classrooms significantly influences SSHJM Behavior Management, which, in turn, affects specific behavioral challenges encountered in class. The alignment between Behavior Management Experience and SSHJM policies determines the strategies employed by teachers, which are often influenced by both institutional guidelines and individual experiences. Barriers and facilitators at SSHJM further impact Behavior Management Strategies, which are essential for addressing student needs effectively. By recognizing trends and patterns in these strategies, recommendations for best practices in Behavior Management Enhancement can be formulated. The top strategies employed by teachers include Structure and Consistency, Positive Behavior Support, Self-regulation Methods, and Reward Systems, which collectively foster an inclusive and nurturing learning environment. Conversely, barriers such as Complex Student Needs, Limited Resources, and Inadequate Training hinder the establishment of optimal learning environments. Addressing these barriers requires tailored approaches,



including ongoing professional development for educators, allocation of resources, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders to ensure an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this research offers a nuanced understanding of behavior management in special education, highlighting the complex interplay of factors influencing behavior dynamics. By examining the experiences and perceptions of teachers, students, and stakeholders, valuable insights into behavior management challenges and strategies have emerged. The findings emphasize the importance of holistic and empathetic approaches to support students with exceptionalities, fostering inclusive and nurturing learning environments.

Moving forward, it is crucial to address the identified needs and overcome barriers comprehensively. From the collected themes, trends, and patterns, recommendations have been proposed. These include developing individualized education plans (IEPs) with Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) for each student, prioritizing ongoing training for educators on differentiated instruction and effective behavior management strategies, fostering collaboration among educators, support staff, parents, and specialists, advocating for increased funding and resources to provide optimal support, implementing structured reward systems and clear behavioral expectations, embracing flexibility in teaching methods and accommodating diverse learning styles, designing inclusive learning environments that consider the physical, sensory, and emotional needs of students, and establishing regular communication channels among educators, parents, and specialists. Implementing these recommendations can create more inclusive, supportive, and effective learning environments for students with special needs, addressing identified barriers and prioritizing essential components for their success.

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