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Original article

Gains and Drawbacks of Teaching Learners with Special Educational Needs: The Untold Stories of Special Education Teachers

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Abstract: This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences and professional realities of Special Education (SPED) teachers in the Division of Sultan Kudarat, Philippines, with the aim of uncovering both the rewards and challenges inherent in delivering inclusive education. Utilizing a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to capture participants' authentic narratives and perspectives. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's framework, was employed to systematically interpret the data. The analysis yielded several prominent themes, including individualized and learner-centered instruction, emotional fulfillment derived from student progress, continuous professional development, inclusion and mainstreaming practices, and strong parent–community engagement. These themes reflect teachers' dedication to meeting diverse learner needs while fostering supportive learning environments. However, the findings also reveal substantial challenges, particularly in managing complex student behaviors, coping with emotional and psychological strain, and addressing issues related to parental acceptance, involvement, and cooperation. To navigate these difficulties, participants reported using various coping and adaptive strategies, including ongoing professional training, peer collaboration and institutional support networks, proactive behavioral management interventions, and strengthened communication with parents and stakeholders. These strategies highlight the importance of collective effort and sustained professional growth in overcoming barriers to effective SPED instruction. The study further emphasizes essential teacher attributes, including flexibility, patience, resilience, and a growth-oriented mindset, as critical factors in sustaining motivation and improving instructional quality. The findings provide valuable insights into the multifaceted experiences of SPED teachers and underscore the need for enhanced professional support systems, targeted capacity-building programs, and strengthened partnerships among schools, families, and communities. Ultimately, this research deepens understanding of the realities faced by special education teachers and offers practical recommendations to advance inclusive education policies and practices within the Division of Sultan Kudarat.

Keywords*: Gains and Drawbacks; Insights and Recommendations; Special Education Teachers; The Untold Stories*

Introduction

The pursuit of integrated and inclusive education for children with special needs, originating from the realm of Special Education (SPED), has been an arduous journey. Despite the implementation of various rules, policies, and programs aimed at advancing inclusive schooling, numerous challenges, barriers, and obstacles continue to persist. Nevertheless, the imperative to provide these children with the comprehensive education they deserve remains unwavering.

In the Philippines, a persistent debate continues among educators about the vital role of Special Education in classrooms. This discussion is closely connected to the "education for all" initiative, which strives to ensure equal educational opportunities and foster more inclusive communities. While the Philippines maintains a legal framework supporting Education for All, particularly in facilitating SPED classes, there remains a pressing need ffectivelyto enforcement enforce these educational provisions, as underscored by Allam and Martin (2021).

At the core of this endeavor lies a profound moral obligation to deliver the best possible education to our children, as articulated in Article 12 of the Convention, which delineates the rights of the child. The United Nations General Assembly's 1959 declaration affirmed that "children with physical, intellectual, or visual impairment shall receive the appropriate treatment and education tailored to their unique conditions."

Legally, the Department of Education is mandated to provide training for SPED teachers, administrators, and supervisors, a responsibility outlined in Republic Act Nos. 3562 and 5250, both enacted on June 13, 1968. However, the support network for educators working with children with learning disabilities must be strengthened, and society must be educated to embrace the diversity of learners with unique educational needs. Consequently, it becomes essential to seamlessly integrate comprehensive special needs education into all teacher professional development programs.

Teaching students with special needs presents a multifaceted challenge, as identified by Abrazado *et al*. (2021). Special education teachers encounter numerous hurdles, including behavior management, curriculum adjustment, communication difficulties, teamwork dynamics, workload management, role ambiguity, professional evaluations, and an urgent need for a more qualified teaching workforce. These challenges have resulted in a disconcertingly high turnover among early-career special education teachers.

Within the educational landscape, special education teachers occupy a pivotal role in institutions serving students with special needs. The demands placed upon these educators are formidable, and their influence on students' success is profound. However, this burden is compounded by a shortage of special education teachers, particularly in urban and rural areas, as illuminated by Abrazado *et al*. (2021).

As we navigate this complex terrain, it becomes evidently clear that further research is imperative to comprehensively understand how special education teachers address the unique educational requirements of learners in the region. A phenomenological study

exploring the unspoken experiences of special education instructors could provide invaluable insights into the realities of educating children with special needs. Thus, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. *What are the experiences and opportunities of Special Education teachers in teaching learners with special educational needs?*

2. *What challenges do SPED Teachers experience in teaching learners with special educational needs?*

3. *What coping mechanisms do SPED teachers use to overcome challenges in teaching learners with special educational needs?*

4. *What insights can be shared with the academe and the community?*

This study, therefore, aspires to bridge the existing gaps in literature and seeks to uncover the untold stories by shedding light on by meticulously tracing and illustrating the triumphs and tribulations experienced by SPED teachers at Isulan Central School-SPED Center, and Tacurong Pilot Elementary School.

Theoretical Lens

This study is anchored in Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which together provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding teacher support, collaboration, and professional growth among Special Education (SPED) teachers. These frameworks explain how teachers develop confidence, resilience, and instructional competence, particularly when supporting learners with special educational needs, and how collaborative practices enhance teaching effectiveness.

Self-Efficacy Theory and SPED Teachers

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory emphasizes individuals' beliefs in their capability to organize and execute actions required to achieve desired outcomes. In the context of SPED teachers, self-efficacy manifests through task mastery, resilience, and coping strategies when addressing diverse and complex learner needs. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to implement inclusive practices, adapt instructional strategies, and persist in the face of behavioral, cognitive, or emotional challenges common in special education settings.

For SPED teachers, self-efficacy is developed through successful teaching experiences, professional feedback, mentoring, and observing more experienced colleagues. Teachers who believe in their instructional competence demonstrate stronger commitment, higher motivation, and greater emotional resilience, enabling them to manage stress and prevent burnout. Consequently, self-efficacy supports sustained engagement in inclusive education and reinforces positive attitudes toward teaching learners with special educational needs.

Zone of Proximal Development and Teacher Collaboration

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) extends beyond student learning and applies to teacher professional development and collaboration. ZPD explains how teachers enhance their instructional capacity through scaffolding, peer support, and collaborative problem-solving. In SPED contexts, collaboration among general education teachers, special education specialists, and support staff reflects a shared ZPD, in which less-experienced teachers learn through guided interaction, modeling, and co-teaching.

Mentoring relationships, professional learning communities, and interdisciplinary teamwork allow teachers to operate within their ZPD by receiving instructional guidance and gradually developing independent competence. Such collaborative practices strengthen instructional quality and improve outcomes for students with special educational needs by ensuring consistent, informed, and adaptive teaching approaches.

International Perspectives and Research Gaps

International research from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and several Asian contexts highlights the critical role of teacher self-efficacy and collaborative practices in the effective delivery of special education. Studies in these contexts emphasize structured mentoring systems, collaborative teaching models, and institutional support as key contributors to teacher effectiveness and retention in SPED settings. Despite growing global attention to inclusive education, comparative studies on SPED teachers' self-efficacy, collaboration, and coping mechanisms remain limited, particularly in developing and underrepresented educational contexts.

The lack of globally comparative research on SPED teacher support systems, especially across diverse cultural and institutional settings, presents a significant gap in the literature. Addressing this gap strengthens the rationale for the present study by contributing context-specific insights while extending the international discourse on SPED teacher development, collaboration, and sustainability

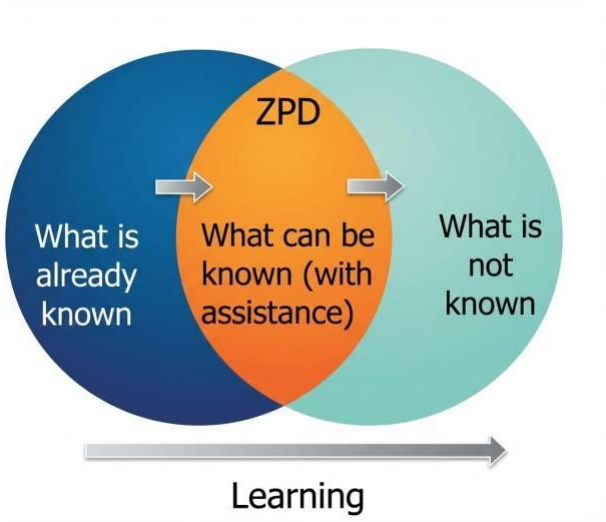

Figure 1. *Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development on Child Learning Process.*

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Special Education (SPED) teachers handling learners with special needs in the Division of Sultan Kudarat. Guided by Husserlian phenomenology and operationalized through Giorgi's (1997) descriptive method, the study focused on describing and understanding participants' experiences as they were lived, while consciously bracketing the researcher's assumptions.

Phenomenology, as described by Creswell (2007), seeks to understand the meaning of experiences shared by several individuals regarding a particular phenomenon. This approach was deemed appropriate given the limited existing literature on the topic and the need to capture the essential aspects of SPED teachers' experiences.

Throughout the research process, interview guides and probing questions were carefully designed, transcriptions were meticulously prepared, and data were analyzed systematically to elicit authentic insights from participants.

The researcher served as observer-participant, interviewer, and interpreter of the data. As an observer-participant, the researcher maintained sensitivity to participants' contexts while consciously practicing *epoché,* or bracketing, to minimize personal biases and preconceived notions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2012). The researcher adopts a constructivist epistemological stance, recognizing that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between researcher and participants. The researcher acknowledges prior exposure to educational settings, which may influence interpretation; therefore, continuous self-reflection, memo writing, and adherence to verbatim transcripts were employed to ensure that findings were grounded in participants' voices rather than the researcher's perspectives.

As the primary data collection instrument, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), facilitated dialogue, and ensured the clarity and relevance of responses. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and validated by experts prior to analysis. Participant codes were assigned to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.

A total of 15 SPED teachers from Isulan Central School SPED Center and Tacurong Pilot Elementary School participated in the study. Participants were purposively selected based on their direct teaching experience with learners with special needs to ensure rich and relevant data. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved—that is, when no new themes or significant insights emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data collection followed a systematic and ethical process. Approval was secured from the Dean of the College of Education, and permission was obtained from school principals. The study objectives were explained to participants, and informed consent was obtained. Orientations, IDIs, and FGDs were conducted voluntarily to ensure participants' clear understanding of the study's purpose.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2013) six-phase thematic analysis framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives. Initial codes were generated line by line, clustered into categories, and refined into overarching themes that captured the essence of lived experiences. Expert validation was employed to review the coding structure and thematic interpretations.

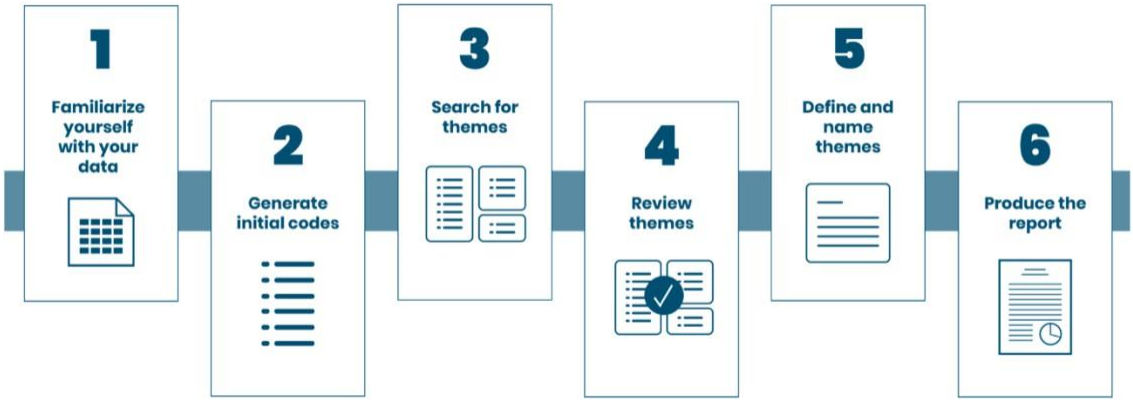

Figure 2. *Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2013) six-phase thematic analysis framework.*

To establish trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria—credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability—were observed. Credibility was ensured through triangulation of IDIs and FGDs, participant checking, and expert review. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail of procedures and analytic decisions. Confirmability was achieved by grounding interpretations in verbatim data and reflexive documentation. Transferability was addressed through rich, thick descriptions that allow readers to determine applicability to other educational contexts.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Participants were informed of the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation. Confidentiality was maintained through coding, and all data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. Upon completion of the study, recordings and transcripts were securely destroyed to protect participants' identities and privacy.

Results and Discussions

Gains on Special Education, Special Education Teachers' Opportunities, and Experiences

The first research question sought to explore the lived experiences and opportunities of special education (SPED) teachers regarding the gains they observed in teaching learners with special educational needs (LSENs). Data analysis revealed five overarching themes: (1) Tailoring Individualized Instruction, (2) Emotional Rewarding, (3) Professional Development through Workshops and Seminars, (4) Inclusion and Mainstreaming, and (5)

Parent and Community Engagement. These themes encapsulate how SPED teachers experience both professional and personal growth through their engagement with learners with special needs.

1. *Tailoring Individualized Instruction*

A recurring theme among participants was the importance of tailoring instruction to each learner's unique needs. Participants consistently emphasized the use of Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) and adaptive teaching strategies, including assistive technology, curriculum modifications, and alternative communication methods, to enhance student learning. One participant remarked:

"We provide and conduct assessments, and after that, we make an Individualized Educational Plan suited to cater to their needs."

This finding aligns with Mahfudz *et al*. (2019), who found that individualized instruction, coupled with assistive tools, significantly enhances learning among LSENs. Teachers in this study utilized speech-to-text software, instructional videos, and sign language to support communication, especially for learners with hearing impairments. As one teacher said:

"For my students who are deaf and mute, sign language is the only means of communication that will help them."

Participants also highlighted the value of repetition and progress monitoring as critical components of individualized instruction.

"Repetition is key for them to master a lesson or skill," one teacher emphasized.

This aligns with McLeskey (2018), who asserted that consistent assessment and feedback enable teachers to make data-driven adjustments to instructional strategies, promoting sustained progress among students with special needs. Overall, individualized instruction enabled teachers to design learning experiences that accommodate learners' pace and capabilities, ensuring inclusivity and academic growth in special education settings.

2. *Emotional Rewarding*

Another salient theme was the emotional fulfillment derived from witnessing learners' progress. Teachers described their profession as profoundly rewarding, noting that even minor student achievements translate into significant milestones for both teacher and learner. One teacher shared:

"Even small achievements matter a lot to us as SPED teachers; it seems like a huge accomplishment."

This emotional dimension echoes Collins and Joseph (2017) and Fu *et al*. (2022), who found that SPED teachers experience a deep sense of purpose and satisfaction when their

students make developmental gains, regardless of scale. Such experiences foster resilience and commitment among teachers. As one participant reflected:

"Feeling fulfilled is an excellent benefit of being in special education, as each milestone achieved is a significant accomplishment."

Teachers also shared instances where their students' long-term achievements, such as progressing to college, brought immense pride and validation:

"Though there have been challenges, I am delighted to see our students now pursuing college degrees."

These narratives emphasize that emotional rewards act as intrinsic motivators, sustaining teachers in a profession that demands empathy, patience, and perseverance.

3. *Professional Development through Workshops and Seminars*

Continuous professional growth emerged as a vital component of teachers' experiences. Participants emphasized the importance of staying current with trends and research through active participation in workshops, seminars, and graduate studies. One teacher shared:

"In 2011, I was selected as a DEPED scholar and sent to pursue a graduate diploma in special education. We worked on developing our capacity to handle learners with intellectual disabilities."

This commitment to professional learning aligns with Fowler *et al*. (2019), who found that ongoing professional development contributes positively to teacher retention and job satisfaction. Similarly, Billingsley *et al*. (2019) and Woulfin and Jones (2021) underscored the effectiveness of tailored and collaborative training programs in enhancing instructional competence. These findings affirm that SPED teachers view professional development not merely as a requirement but as a pathway for growth and a means to better serve their learners. Their dedication to continuous learning exemplifies a proactive approach to improving pedagogical skills, thereby elevating the quality of special education instruction.

4. *Inclusion and Mainstreaming*

The theme of inclusion and mainstreaming underscores educators' advocacy for integrating students with special educational needs into standard classroom settings. Participants articulated that inclusion fosters acceptance, social engagement, and a sense of community among pupils. As one participant remarked:

"We can mainstream them into regular classes; you can see the joy on their faces when they feel included alongside the rest of the students."

This resonates with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2017), which promotes the placement of learners with disabilities in the least restrictive environment

possible. Moreover, Klang *et al*. (2020) and Garrote *et al*. (2017) found that inclusive settings, when supported by trained educators and collaborative teaching methods such as cooperative learning and peer tutoring, foster both academic and social growth. Participants also acknowledged that inclusion extends beyond classroom placement, cultivating empathy and understanding among all learners. Thus, inclusion and mainstreaming are not just educational practices but social commitments toward equity and acceptance.

5. Parent and Community Engagement

The concluding theme highlights the vital importance of parents and community involvement in the comprehensive development of learners with special needs. Participants stressed that involving families through collaboration, training, and transparent communication enhances the educational process. One educator remarked:

"You are not only assisting the student but also supporting their parents and families, which makes your work truly meaningful.

Teachers highlighted opportunities to collaborate with the Department of Education and local divisions to develop specialized learning materials and facilitate parent workshops.

"It is an excellent opportunity for us to unite with parents who are always active in fulfilling our duties to learners," one participant noted.

This finding supports Avramidis and Kalyva (2018), who emphasized that community involvement promotes inclusive behavior, and Nolan and Kapp (2017), who argued that empathy and collaboration between teachers and parents enhance children's learning outcomes. Furthermore, Bouck and Flanagan (2019) and Ranklin *et al*. (2019) highlighted the unique but often overlooked contributions of both mothers and fathers in supporting children with special needs. Parent and community engagement thus bridges school-based interventions with home-based reinforcement, creating a supportive environment where every child can thrive.

Teachers' Challenges in Special Education

The second research question aimed to identify and explore the challenges encountered by special education (SPED) teachers in teaching learners with special educational needs (LSENs). Data analysis revealed three overarching themes: (1) Managing Behavior, (2) Emotional and Personal Challenges, and (3) Parental Acceptance and Cooperation. These themes encapsulate the complex realities SPED teachers face as they navigate behavioral, emotional, and collaborative challenges in their professional practice.

1. Managing Behavior

Behavior management has emerged as one of the most significant challenges faced by special education teachers. Participants emphasized that instructing learners with special needs often involves addressing aggressive, defiant, or self-injurious behaviors. Educators underscored the importance of understanding the underlying causes of such behaviors,

which frequently originate from students' difficulty in communicating their needs effectively. One participant shared practical strategies for behavior management.

"I use techniques to help manage their behavior. For example, I place them on trampolines to burn off excess energy, enabling them to sit correctly and concentrate on the task."

Teachers also observed that disruptive behaviors, including tantrums, aggression, and property destruction, frequently occur unpredictably and disrupt the instructional flow. As one educator articulated:

"It's hard to start a lesson when a learner throws tantrums right away."

Another participant recounted a distressing experience that underscores the risks involved:

"A learner punched me in the stomach while I was pregnant. It was frustrating, but I still helped calm the students. Situations like that make us think deeply about what to do and why it happens."

Daily exposure to these challenges imposes both physical and emotional burdens. One participant remarked:

"Every day we face challenges as SPED teacher sometimes even getting hit or having our phones broken during a child's tantrum."

These accounts indicate that behavior management within special education necessitates patience, adaptability, and emotional resilience. O'Neill *et al*. (2017) advocated for structured behavioral interventions to foster positive conduct and mitigate disruptive behaviors. Concurrently, Westwood (2018) underscored that a person-centered approach, which emphasizes the strengths and needs of each learner, empowers educators to develop tailored strategies that effectively minimize behavioral issues. Educators involved in this study exhibited ingenuity in executing interventions; however, they continue to encounter challenges when addressing complex behavioral expressions rooted in deeper communication barriers. Consequently, behavior management remains a complex issue that tests the emotional and professional capacities of special education teachers.

2. Emotional and Personal Challenges

The second principal theme pertains to the emotional and personal impact of teaching within special education. Participants characterized their experiences as "a roller-coaster ride" or "a rocky road," thereby reflecting the unpredictable and emotionally intense nature of their daily endeavors. A teacher conveyed their perspective as follows:

"It was a roller-coaster ride because every day was a different experience, especially when dealing with children who may have tantrums at any hour."

Another echoed a similar sentiment:

"During my years of teaching, it was like a rocky road because every learner has unique situations every day."

These statements illustrate how the continuous demand for empathy, attention, and composure can lead to physical and mental exhaustion. Teachers reported fatigue from constant vigilance:

[1] *"Sometimes, we experience body pain because we need to stay attentive and focused on them all the time."*

[2] *"Being a special education teacher requires much patience. It is essential to remain calm when dealing with students who may have tantrums or become agitated."*

Despite these hardships, participants also expressed profound emotional attachment and compassion towards their learners. They perceive their role not merely as educators but also as moral guides.

"I always remind myself that my learners do not yet know what is right or wrong. I am here to teach them academics and values to help them learn what's right.

Nevertheless, such emotional investment frequently results in distress when students encounter setbacks or cease their schooling. As one educator recollected:

"The most heartbreaking moment was when the parents decided to stop their child's schooling. I still wanted to teach the learner, but I couldn't do anything. It was very frustrating and emotionally painful."

This aligns with Powell *et al*. (2020), who observed that special education teachers often develop strong emotional bonds with their students, leading to both fulfillment and emotional strain. Likewise, Schaufeli *et al*. (2019) discussed *compassion fatigue*, defined as the emotional exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to others' trauma and behavioral difficulties. To mitigate these emotional burdens, Schaufeli *et al*. (2019) and Powell *et al*. (2020) emphasized the need for institutional support systems that include stress management programs, peer collaboration, and administrative guidance. A supportive environment can foster teacher well-being and enhance resilience, helping SPED teachers sustain their commitment amid the emotional demands of their work.

3. Parental Acceptance and Cooperation

The third theme highlights the challenge of securing parental acceptance and cooperation in the education of learners with special needs. Participants emphasized that effective collaboration between home and school is crucial for reinforcing learning; however, this is frequently impeded by parental denial, unrealistic expectations, and a lack of consistency in follow-through at home. Educators conveyed that some parents have difficulty accepting their child's condition and anticipate immediate academic progress.

"Some parents are still in denial about their child's condition and think that within a year, their child will already achieve the expected progress. This puts pressure on the learners."

Another participant echoed:

"One of the challenges we face is the reluctance of parents to accept their child's situation."

Teachers also expressed their frustration about inconsistent learning support between school and home:

[1] *"It's hard to impose education when there's no follow-up at home."*

[2] *"Some parents do not take their child's learning seriously, so the child loses retention and goes back to zero."*

[3] *"Sometimes, parents teach differently from how we teach at school, which leads to confusion among the learners."*

These findings align with the research by Nuske *et al*. (2019), who identified that communication gaps between educators and parents impede the effective implementation of individualized education plans. Similarly, Kavale (2021) highlighted that parental acceptance is pivotal to a child's progress and that unrealistic expectations can often generate unnecessary stress for both the learner and the educator. Participants concurred that collaboration with parents is essential to maintaining progress and ensuring continuity of learning. When parents actively participate with teachers and reinforce lessons at home, students experience benefits such as consistency, encouragement, and enhanced emotional support. Conversely, limited parental cooperation hampers holistic development and exacerbates teachers' professional stress.

Coping Mechanisms by Special Education Teachers in Teaching Learners with Special Educational Needs

The third research question examined the coping mechanisms special education (SPED) teachers use to address the challenges of teaching learners with special educational needs (LSENs). Data analysis revealed four major themes: (1) Upskilling through Professional Development and Training, (2) Collaboration and Support among Colleagues, (3) Support for Positive Behavior, and (4) Active Collaboration with Parents and Stakeholders. These themes highlight the adaptive strategies teachers employ to maintain professional competence, emotional balance, and instructional effectiveness in their work with learners who have diverse needs.

1. Upskilling through Professional Development and Training

This theme underscores the vital importance of ongoing professional development in enhancing educators' competence and confidence in instructing learners with special educational needs. Participants noted that participation in workshops, conferences, and

specialized training programs provides valuable opportunities to acquire new strategies, refine teaching methodologies, and stay current with prevailing trends in special education. One educator observed:

[1] *"I would suggest that the best solution is to be equipped with enough training and workshops to develop teachers professionally."* Another echoed:

[2] *"They allow us to join seminars and workshops about strategies for teaching learners with special needs, and that is important."*

Participants also emphasized the importance of creativity and adaptability in teaching:

[1] *"You must be an innovative, resourceful, and creative teacher to support learning approaches and strategies in any educational setting."*

[2] *"As a teacher in special education, you must be creative, responsive, and resourceful every day."*

Professional development not only improves instructional skills but also significantly enhances teachers' ability to manage daily classroom challenges through targeted training initiatives. As Turnbull *et al*. (2017) noted, professional development programs that emphasize Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), inclusion policies, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) deepen educators' understanding of the legal and pedagogical principles underpinning inclusive education practices.

Furthermore, the National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET, 2020) emphasized that ongoing professional development enables educators to adapt to evolving pedagogical methodologies and incorporate technological advancements into their teaching practices. Such opportunities empower teachers to implement evidence-based interventions effectively and to address the complex needs of learners with special educational needs with greater proficiency and assurance.

2. Collaboration and Support among Colleagues

Collaboration and collegial support have emerged as significant coping mechanisms for special education teachers. Participants highlighted that teamwork promotes professional development, emotional assistance, and collaborative problem-solving, all of which are essential in addressing classroom challenges and ensuring student achievement. One educator remarked:

[1] *"We have received teachers from regular classes who help cater to our learners. They attend seminars and workshops, also about handling learners with special needs."* Another stated:

[2] *"When we encounter problems with our students that we can't resolve individually, we do group collaborations. Our colleagues really help us."* Teachers described their peers as a source of encouragement and motivation:

[3] *"Our teamwork helps me stay motivated every day because I see my colleagues' determination and passion for teaching."*

[4] *"After each class, we have a focus group discussion where we share ideas and strategies, which we can apply to help our students."*

Collaboration enables educators to refine their instructional methods, share effective strategies, and collaboratively develop interventions tailored to individual learners. McIntosh and Goodman (2017) emphasized that peer collaboration enhances the quality of instruction by incorporating diverse perspectives into intervention design. Similarly, Gargiulo and Bouck (2019) observed that joint planning among special education teachers fosters innovation and improves outcomes for students with disabilities. Educators also underscored the significance of collaborating with other professionals, such as therapists and counselors, to address the diverse needs of learners with special educational needs (LSENs). Yell *et al*. (2021) highlighted that collaboration between special education teachers and specialists, including speech-language pathologists, enhances communication strategies and ensures comprehensive support for students. Overall, collegial collaboration fosters a supportive environment that promotes both teacher well-being and student development.

3. Support for Positive Behavior

Supporting positive behavior is an additional essential coping mechanism utilized by special education teachers. Participants articulated that establishing explicit expectations, implementing structured routines, and employing positive reinforcement strategies contribute to reducing behavioral challenges and fostering a more conducive learning environment. One educator observed:

[1] *"Setting positive thoughts helps motivate the learners."* Another emphasis is:

[2] *"Organizing your time, setting priorities, and extending patience are the best solutions for supporting positive behavior."* Teachers also practiced self-care and stress management to maintain composure and effectiveness:

[3] *"Self-care should come first before taking care of others. Take care of your mind and thoughts to ensure you are in the right state to help others."*

[4] *"We always maintain a positive mindset in unexpected situations. Stay positive."*

Participants mentioned using visual schedules, social skills activities, and structured play sessions to promote independence and social interaction:

[5] *"Every Friday, we have fun games where all the learners with special needs interact and socialize."*

[6] *"You can see their development from scribbling to writing their names and learning how to socialize with classmates."*

According to Algozzine *et al*. (2018), establishing clear behavioral expectations fosters a structured and predictable classroom climate, which is essential for learners with disabilities. Likewise, Fisher *et al*. (2017) found that visual schedules effectively promote independence and reduce anxiety, while Odom *et al*. (2017) linked independence-building activities to improved quality of life among individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, Bellini *et al*. (2019) emphasized that social skills training significantly enhances interpersonal communication and relationships among learners with special needs. These practices reflect teachers' proactive efforts to maintain classroom harmony and address behavioral difficulties constructively.

4. Active Collaboration with Parents and Stakeholders

The concluding theme emphasizes the critical significance of proactive collaboration with parents and stakeholders as a strategy for coping. Participants highlighted that establishing effective partnerships with families enhances reinforcement of learning, ensures consistency between home and educational settings, and provides emotional support to both educators and students. One participant expressed these collaborative efforts as follows:

[1] *"We conduct special needs parent orientations with therapists, division staff, and stakeholders to educate parents. Parents participate in our events and support us."*

Another added:

[2] *"Parents attend PTA meetings even when they have work. They communicate with us through text and stay involved."*

Teachers also shared the importance of maintaining open communication with parents:

[3] *"I conduct simple interviews with parents about their child's situation at home. I always follow up and remind them about their child's progress."*

[4] *"We need the support of parents, especially during school activities. We are grateful for their cooperation and presence."*

Collaboration with families is not only advantageous but also legally obligatory. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2020, as cited in Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2018) mandates parental involvement in the formulation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), thereby ensuring that each student receives suitable educational support. Parental perspectives regarding their child's strengths, needs, and preferences are invaluable for devising effective instructional strategies and behavioral interventions. Through consistent communication, shared responsibility, and mutual understanding, educators and parents establish a cohesive support system that promotes students' academic and personal growth while alleviating the workload and emotional burden on teachers.

Insights by Special Education Teachers in Teaching Learners with Special Educational Needs

The fourth research question sought the perspectives and recommendations of special education (SPED) teachers to be shared with the academe and the community on teaching learners with special educational needs (LSENs). Data analysis revealed three (3) general themes: (1) Exhibiting Flexibility and Patience, (2) Cultivating a Growth Mindset, and (3) Continued Professional Development. These themes encapsulate SPED teachers' insights into the values, attitudes, and practices essential to effectively teach LSENs.

1. Exhibiting Flexibility and Patience

This theme underscores the vital significance of patience and adaptability—attributes that characterize proficient special education educators. These professionals possess the expertise necessary to address the diverse and intricate requirements of their students while upholding empathy and composure. Their capacity to modify instructional strategies in accordance with each learner's unique differences promotes an inclusive environment conducive to growth and achievement both within and beyond the classroom. Participants highlighted that flexibility is essential for accommodating the changing needs of students facing educational challenges. As one educator articulated:

[1] *"When you hear the term 'special education,' you think of 'patience. As a teacher, you must be flexible in teaching and handling these learners."* Another participant shared:

[2] *"As a SPED teacher, it is important to remember that learning can be challenging. However, it is essential to have patience."*

A teacher also acknowledged the importance of cultivating students' strengths and interests—beyond their disabilities—by encouraging talents in sports or the arts, as she mentioned:

[3] *"We focus on developing the abilities and interests of SPED learners, not only their disabilities but also their capabilities."*

According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2018), flexible teaching enables educators to adapt to students' varying learning styles and abilities. Similarly, Smith *et al*. (2020) emphasized that individualized education programs (IEPs) require patience and adaptability for successful implementation. Johnson and Brown (2022) further found that flexible and patient classroom management improves behavioral outcomes among learners with special educational needs.

2. Cultivating a Growth Mindset

A growth mindset is essential in the realm of special education, as it enables both educators and students to perceive challenges as valuable opportunities for learning and development. Participants highlighted that perseverance, self-acceptance, and resilience

constitute fundamental elements of success within this domain. As one instructor articulated:

[1] *"I am a Special Teacher, and it takes a special teacher to teach those special children. Next is to grow personally and professionally."* Another reflected:

[2] *"Kahit anong type ng learner destined sa akin, makaya ko talaga... I am able to cater and handle every type of learner na meron ako."*

[3] *"Whatever type of learner is assigned to me; I can handle them. As a SPED teacher, I have grown professionally by learning to cater to diverse learners."*

Participants also emphasized the importance of acceptance and compassion:

[4] *"Nobody would accept those children except for special education teachers, so we must love and accept them for who they are. We must have a big heart for them."*

Research substantiates these perspectives. Neff (2018) underscored that self-compassion facilitates resilience and motivation, especially when individuals encounter adversities. Similarly, Duckworth (2018) and Duckworth *et al*. (2018) emphasized that perseverance—commonly referred to as grit—is crucial for overcoming obstacles and attaining long-term success. By fostering a growth mindset, special education teachers assist students in recognizing their strengths, embracing learning through effort, and nurturing confidence and a sense of belonging.

3. *Continued Professional Development*

Continued professional development (CPD) has been identified as a crucial aspect by participants, who highlighted that the learning process must be ongoing to effectively respond to the changing requirements of LSENs. Educators emphasized the significance of engaging in seminars, workshops, and training sessions to enhance their competencies and remain informed about the latest developments in pedagogical and technological fields. As participants articulated:

[1] *"Para mas mag-grow kami professionally... full support from the Department of Education in providing free seminars and workshops for our development."*

[2] *"Ma-recommend ko gd tani training and updates para mas mag-grow professionally ang mga teachers sa Special Education."*

[3] *"By sending us to different workshops and seminars, we can innovate our teaching strategies and become more effective SPED teachers."*

[4] *"As teachers, we should never stop learning. Continuous education is necessary because our learners need the latest and most innovative teaching methods."*

Research affirms this importance. Wilczynski and Sinclair (2018) emphasized that ongoing education and adaptability enhance teachers' ability to apply research-based practices effectively. Likewise, Smith and Johnson (2020) found that targeted professional development increases SPED teachers' confidence and competence in implementing evidence-based instructional strategies. Continued professional development ensures that special education teachers remain equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, and innovative approaches to deliver high-quality education to LSENs. As lifelong learners, SPED teachers strengthen their capacity to make meaningful contributions to their students, the academe, and the broader educational community.

Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendation

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the study's findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations, titled "Gains and Drawbacks in Teaching Learners with Special Educational Needs: The Untold Stories of Special Education Teachers." The research employed a qualitative phenomenological methodology and involved fifteen (15) participants—comprising eight (8) individuals in in-depth interviews (IDIs) and seven (7) in focus group discussions (FGDs)—from Isulan Central School SPED Center and Tacurong Pilot Elementary School. The investigation examined the lived experiences, opportunities, challenges, coping strategies, and insights of Special Education (SPED) teachers in instructing learners with special educational needs (LSENs).

The results demonstrated SPED educators' commitment, resilience, and emotional dedication in managing the demands of inclusive education. Four principal themes surfaced through the analysis. The first theme highlighted educators' experiences and opportunities, including personalized instruction, professional development, emotional satisfaction, inclusive practices, and engagement with parents and the community. These aspects illustrate the constructive dimensions of SPED instruction and the strong sense of purpose among teachers. The second theme addressed challenges, including behavior management, emotional and personal stress, and limited parental participation, underscoring the profession's demanding nature. The third theme discussed coping mechanisms, including ongoing professional training, collegial support, positive behavior strategies, and collaboration with parents. The fourth theme offered insights for both the academic and broader communities, emphasizing the significance of patience, adaptability, a growth mindset, and lifelong learning.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study offer meaningful contributions to Self-Efficacy Theory and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), while also highlighting the concept of emotional labor in teaching.

Self-efficacy theory emphasizes that teachers' belief in their capabilities significantly influences their motivation, persistence, and instructional effectiveness. The participants'

narratives demonstrate how professional development, peer collaboration, and successful classroom experiences strengthen teachers' confidence in addressing diverse learner needs.

The Zone of Proximal Development underscores the importance of scaffolding and guided support. In SPED contexts, this is reflected in collaborative practices among teachers, parents, and communities to support learners' academic and emotional growth.

Additionally, the study reveals the emotional labor inherent in SPED teaching, as educators continuously manage their emotions while providing care, patience, and encouragement to learners with special needs. Recognizing emotional labor broadens understanding of SPED teachers' professional realities and highlights the need for institutional emotional support systems.

Together, these theories explain how SPED teachers sustain engagement despite challenges and how supportive environments enhance both teacher effectiveness and learner outcomes.

Policy Implication

The findings highlight several key implications for educational policy and practice:

1. *Teacher Training and Professional Development* – The Department of Education (DepEd) should enhance ongoing training programs that focus on inclusive strategies, behavior management, assistive technology, and emotional resilience.
2. *SPED Resource Allocation* – Schools need to be properly equipped with specialized materials, facilities, and instructional tools to meet the varied needs of learners with disabilities.
3. *Counseling and Mental Health Services* – Access to institutional counseling should be extended to SPED teachers to support stress management, emotional well-being, and prevent burnout.
4. *Strengthened Parent–School Partnerships* – Policies should promote structured parent involvement programs to foster better collaboration and support for learners.

Implementing these actions can improve teacher well-being, instructional quality, and student success, contributing to a more inclusive educational system.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its valuable insights, this study has some limitations. It was conducted at only two institutions in Sultan Kudarat, limiting the extent to which the results can be generalized to other areas. The small sample size typical of phenomenological studies also restricts broader applicability. Additionally, as a qualitative phenomenological study, the outcomes depend on participants' personal experiences and the researcher's interpretations, which could introduce bias despite attempts at reflexivity and bracketing.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could build upon this work by exploring burnout and emotional well-being among SPED teachers, monitoring changes in their professional identity and growth over time, conducting comparative analyses across various regions or educational divisions to understand contextual differences, and collecting insights from students and parents to attain a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive education. Such efforts would enhance the understanding of special education teaching practices and support the development of evidence-based policies.

This study underscores that improving educational opportunities for students with special needs requires collective efforts grounded in self-efficacy, collaborative scaffolding, and emotional support. Enhancing teacher confidence, prioritizing mental health, ensuring adequate resources, and fostering strong partnerships among stakeholders are essential for establishing inclusive learning environments. Ultimately, providing support to SPED teachers enables them to serve learners with diverse needs more effectively, thereby fostering equitable and meaningful education for all.

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