

The Experiences of SPED Teachers from Rural Areas in Handling Students with Special Needs

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Abstract. Teaching offers a range of experiences, which become more complex when teachers work with students with special needs. This study aims to bridge a critical gap by providing support to SPED teachers in handling students with special needs. Through an exploration of their lived experiences, the study seeks to uncover a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in the teaching-learning process. Employing a phenomenological-qualitative approach, the study utilized face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with ten purposively selected SPED teachers residing in rural areas of Sarangani Province. These participants were distributed across the municipalities of Alabel (2), Glan (2), Kiamba (2), Maitum (1), Malandag (2), and Malungon (1), reflecting the limited number of SPED teachers within the region. Each interview lasted between 20 and 45 minutes, allowing for in-depth discussion of their experiences. The data gathered were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. Findings reveal that SPED teachers face distinct motivations, challenges, and coping mechanisms, along with insights that highlight the dedication and resilience required in this field. The study concludes that, despite the significant challenges SPED teachers face, they demonstrate remarkable adaptability and a strong commitment to fostering student growth. This in-depth exploration of their interconnected motivations, challenges, and coping strategies provides a holistic understanding of SPED teachers' roles within educational institutions. The findings advocate for enhanced support systems and resources that acknowledge the complexities of their responsibilities and empower them to create positive impacts in students' lives. Further research is recommended to build upon these insights and develop targeted interventions that bolster SPED teachers' professional well-being and effectiveness.

Keywords: Experiences; Philippines; Rural areas; SPED teachers; Students with special needs.

1.0 Introduction

Teaching presents a range of experiences, particularly when educators work with students who have special needs. In such settings, creative approaches can enhance learning (Cherry, 2022). Teachers must shift their focus from emphasizing student limitations to removing learning barriers—through improved training and ongoing professional development—to enhance the quality of their teaching (UNESCO, 2020). The qualities of Special Education (SPED) teachers are vital in building a strong educational foundation for students with disabilities (Shaukat et al., 2018). These educators have a deep understanding of their students' needs and cultivate professional skills to create supportive learning environments, despite facing challenges. SPED teachers are driven by various motivations throughout their careers. Yasmeen et al. (2019) emphasize their commitment to supporting

students with special needs and making a positive impact. Dulker et al. (2020) further explain that this impact brings intrinsic satisfaction and emotional reward. While financial incentives are not always central, support from schools and access to professional development significantly contribute to job satisfaction and retention (Kumar & Hossain, 2017). Recognizing these motivational factors is essential to sustaining a committed SPED teaching workforce.

However, SPED teachers in the Philippines face unique challenges that affect both their well-being and effectiveness. Many lack adequate training to support students with disabilities, underscoring the need for ongoing development (Allam & Martin, 2021). Professional growth also helps reduce burnout, as noted by Buchwald-McGlennon (2023), and is especially important in rural areas, where resources are limited (McHaskell, 2021). Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring that SPED teachers can thrive and deliver high-quality education. Despite these obstacles, SPED teachers show resilience by using various coping strategies. Peer collaboration fosters emotional support and the sharing of strategies, contributing to a more inclusive educational environment (Basister & Valenzuela, 2021). Their dedication and commitment are strengthened by personal traits and a strong sense of purpose (Cunningham, 2015). Prioritizing self-care, teamwork, and professional development enables SPED teachers to effectively manage the demands of their role and find meaning in their work.

The objective of this study is to comprehensively explore the experiences of SPED teachers, particularly regarding their motivations, challenges, and coping mechanisms, while also considering the complexities of the teaching and learning process and understanding diverse learning needs. Furthermore, the existing body of knowledge predominantly focuses on the experiences of SPED teachers in urban areas, thereby leaving a significant gap in understanding the unique circumstances faced by SPED teachers in rural settings. By shedding light on the experiences of SPED teachers from rural areas, particularly those from academic institutions in the municipalities of the province of Sarangani, the study aims to fill this gap and provide valuable insights to support SPED teachers in aiding students with special needs. By delving into their experiences, the study may gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of the teaching-learning process.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative-phenomenological research design to explore participants' experiences, uncovering underlying reasons and processes (Tenny et al., 2022; Qutoshi, 2018). This approach broadens perspectives and deepens understanding of lived experiences. Moreover, qualitative research enables the exploration of complex phenomena in natural settings, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the social and cultural factors influencing participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013).

The qualitative-phenomenological research design is well-suited for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of SPED teachers in rural areas. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of human experiences and interpreting the meanings individuals attribute to those experiences (Creswell, 2013). By employing this approach, the researchers gained valuable insights into the motivations, challenges, and coping mechanisms of SPED teachers in rural educational settings.

2.2 Research Participants

Ensuring the selection of participants who effectively represent a population is essential for achieving precise research outcomes. In this study, the researchers employed purposive sampling to select participants, a method designed to identify individuals with consistent characteristics (Crossman, 2020). The targeted population consisted of 10 special education teachers residing in rural areas, reflecting the limited number of special education teachers in the Department of Education of Sarangani. Additionally, the participants were distributed across various municipalities within the province, including Alabel (2), Glan (2), Kiamba (2), Maitum (1), Malandag (2), and Malungon (1).

Target participants must possess specific qualifications to participate in data collection. They must hold a valid professional teaching license and be serving in the Department of Education - Sarangani. The participants must be employed in a public SPED center located within the municipalities of Sarangani, specifically in Alabel, Glan, Kiamba, Maitum, Malandag, and Malungon, and have completed at least two (2) months of training relevant to special education. Lastly, the participants must have at least five (5) years of experience working as SPED teachers

in a center catering to students with special needs. The researchers specifically excluded SPED teachers who fall into the following categories: those teaching in regular classes and teachers who are new to the profession and still require training to teach special classes.

2.3 Research Instrument

The researchers obtained the required data by conducting individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Semi-structured interviews, a qualitative research tool commonly used in social science contexts for exploratory purposes (Adams, 2015; Magaldi & Berler, 2020), involve a combination of open-ended questions and follow-up queries that explore the reasons behind or the methods used by participants in their responses. It allows the interviews to be focused while enabling researchers to examine relevant ideas that may arise during the interview, which could further enhance comprehension (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This approach usually involves a dialogue between the researcher and the participant, facilitated by a flexible interview process and enhanced by follow-up inquiries, questions, and comments.

In addition, a researcher-made interview guide questionnaire comprised fourteen (14) questions designed to explore the experiences of SPED teachers in their occupational journey. The researchers intend to conduct in-person interviews with participants in their respective workplaces. The research tool was validated by three research experts: a licensed professional teacher specializing in working with students with special needs, a registered psychologist, and a registered psychometrician.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

This section explains how researchers gathered information for the study. It describes the steps researchers took to collect data carefully, ensuring they obtained accurate and complete information about what they were studying.

Before gathering the needed data, the researchers obtained approval from the college dean and thesis adviser. Subsequently, the researchers drafted a letter to the Schools Division Superintendent of the Sarangani Division, requesting permission to collect initial information, which was then signed. To establish a strong foundation for the study, the researchers conducted a preliminary assessment. This involved face-to-face interactions with SPED teachers, gathering data on their professional background, training duration, and years of experience working with students with special needs. Thus, the researchers were able to develop inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study participants, ultimately leading to the selection of a sample size of 10 SPED teachers.

Moreover, to gain in-depth insights into SPED teachers' experiences, the researchers developed a semi-structured interview guide comprising fourteen (14) open-ended questions. These questions explored teachers' motivations, challenges, and coping mechanisms. Prior to conducting the interviews, the instrument undergoes a validation process with three experts: a licensed professional teacher who handles students with special needs, ensuring the questions resonate with the target population; a registered psychologist in practice; and a registered psychometrician. This process ensures that the interview guide effectively gathers rich and relevant data. Following the validation of the interview guide questionnaire, the researchers drafted letters seeking approval to conduct the pilot interview at the selected target academic institutions within the province of Sarangani, consisting of four (4) SPED teachers. Letters are provided to school heads and principals, permitting the researchers to conduct their study within the school premises. The thesis adviser, the college dean, and the Schools Division Superintendent of the Sarangani Division signed these letters.

Before the pilot interview, the participants were provided with the informed consent form. The researchers also explained the contents of the form and walked the participants through the process to ensure their understanding and consent. Additionally, the researchers assured the participants that all data would be kept confidential and securely stored, with access limited to the research team only. Personal identifiers were removed to protect participants' privacy, and all data would be used solely for this study.

After the pilot interview, the researchers drafted the letters seeking approval to conduct the final interview, this time at all selected academic institutions within the province of Sarangani, consisting of ten (10) SPED teachers. Letters were also provided to school heads and principals, permitting the researchers to conduct their study within the school premises. The thesis adviser, the college dean, and the Schools Division Superintendent of the

Sarangani Division signed these letters. The letters mentioned above are official documentation confirming the researchers' visits to the respective academic institutions.

Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. To guarantee participant confidentiality, all identifying information is removed from the transcript during a de-identification process. The transcripts were securely stored and only accessible to the researchers. By adhering to these rigorous data protection protocols, the researchers ensure the confidentiality and security of participant information. This process also allows the researchers to gain valuable insights into the clarity, flow, and effectiveness of the interview guide. The information gathered is then used to refine the guide before data collection begins for the main study, ultimately leading to richer and more meaningful data. Thematic analysis, as employed by Braun and Clarke (2006), is used to analyze SPED teacher interviews, uncovering recurring themes that provide a deeper understanding of their experiences.

2.5 Data Analysis

To interpret the data accurately and effectively, the researchers utilized the thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach involves a six-step process that helps researchers understand people's beliefs, perspectives, knowledge, experiences, and values by analyzing qualitative data, such as interview transcripts. The following outlines the process of analyzing the data:

First, the research process involves transcribing audio into text, carefully reading, and taking initial notes. It also includes reviewing the data to familiarize oneself with the transcript. The researchers used the data collected from the participants and transcribed audio recordings. Before examining the responses in detail, they ensure they fully understand the data gathered.

Second, the researchers input the participants' data by selecting essential text, usually short phrases or sentences, which serve as labels or codes to summarize the study. At this point, they reviewed each interview transcript, highlighting relevant information related to the study. The researchers noted down all phrases and sentences matching these codes and may develop new ones as they go through the text. After reviewing the text, they grouped all the data based on these codes. This process highlights the primary aspects of the data and helps identify themes.

Third, the researchers identified themes by examining the created codes, looking for patterns, and developing broader themes. The codes are incorporated into these themes to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Fourth, the researchers examined the identified themes and checked how well they aligned with the collected data. They ensure that the themes accurately reflect the essence of the data. To improve accuracy, themes may be broken into smaller parts, combined, removed, or newly created. The researchers carefully reviewed all essential information when refining the data.

Fifth, the researchers clarify and label the themes. This step is crucial, as it assigns meaning to the themes by giving them names. Each theme is explained, with attention given to its importance in the data to gain a deeper understanding. It is essential to provide clear and concise names for each theme.

Lastly, the researchers write up their findings. They defined and named the themes identified in the data, providing clear and concise labels that accurately represent their content and significance. Naming the themes creates a structure for interpreting and understanding the data, enabling readers to grasp the study's key findings. The conclusion highlights the most important results and demonstrates how the analysis addresses the research questions.

Throughout this process, the researchers remained committed to understanding participants' subjective experiences, minimizing bias, and delving deeper into the data to uncover its significance. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize these six methodological steps, underscoring their role in enhancing the accessibility, transparency, and flexibility of the analysis.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The researchers ensured the anonymity of all respondents by withholding their names and identities throughout the study. Anonymity is maintained by refraining from disclosing any identifying information of participants during data collection, analysis, and the presentation of study findings. This emphasizes the importance of preserving anonymity by avoiding the collection of personally identifiable information (Wiles et al., 2008). The researchers strictly adhere to protocols that protect the information of participants, particularly SPED teachers, thus upholding their rights and privacy.

The researchers prioritized obtaining informed consent from all participants before their involvement in the study. Informed consent involves providing prospective individuals with comprehensive information about the research study and their role in it, empowering them to make autonomous decisions about participation (Research Support, n.d.). Throughout the interview process, the researchers dedicated ample time to explain the study's objectives and the procedure for withdrawing consent at any phase. The researchers ensured that participants were provided with all necessary information and had the opportunity to ask questions before voluntarily participating in the study.

Under the Data Privacy Act of 2012, researchers prioritize confidentiality to protect respondent anonymity. Confidentiality involves ensuring the strict protection of sensitive information, such as personal data, to prevent unauthorized access, use, or disclosure. A study by Allen (2017) emphasizes the importance of confidentiality in research, highlighting its role in safeguarding participants' rights to privacy and maintaining trust. All data gathered, comprising personal profiles and responses, were held in strict confidence by the researchers. This information remained undisclosed and unshared unless the respondents granted explicit consent.

3.0 Results and Discussion

This study examined the experiences, including the motivations, challenges, and coping mechanisms, of SPED teachers from rural areas who work with students with special needs.

3.1 Motivations of SPED Teachers

SPED teachers, particularly those working with students with special needs in rural areas, have multiple motivations for continuing their profession. From the gathered data, three (3) themes emerged, highlighting various factors that serve as the motivations of these SPED teachers. These motivations are discussed in the following sections:

Theme 1: Inspiration from Students' Progress

The inspiration SPED teachers derive from their students' growth and development emerges as a powerful motivational force in their professional journey. Despite the limited academic progress often observed due to students' circumstances, teachers find immense fulfillment in witnessing their students' milestones and overall growth. As one participant shared:

"Academically, they have not achieved much. Maybe in the eight years we have been here, you would already feel happy if they have learned to write their names – that is the kind of progress we're talking about. But in other aspects of their lives, I believe I've been able to help them grow. You can really see how far they've come and what they've managed to achieve. So, it's not just about me touching certain parts of their lives – it's also about being part of who they've become as individuals." [P6, lines 1915–1922]

Reflecting on the profound personal impact they make beyond academics. These moments serve as a testament to their commitment and reinforce their sense of responsibility in nurturing their students' unique potential. One teacher expressed:

"I guess I'm inspired by the fact that I can contribute, even in a small way, by witnessing their development in various activities." [P4, lines 1068–1071]

Emphasizing how even the most minor signs of progress serve as a powerful motivator. Villareal et al. (2022) emphasize the important role SPED teachers play in fostering such progress, highlighting their impact on both academic and personal development. Moreover, the findings align with Glessner and Johnson's (2020) assertion that cultivating a positive and supportive learning environment not only enhances student well-being but also

motivates teachers to persevere in their roles. This motivation is further echoed in the words of a teacher who said:

"What truly inspires me to teach special learners is seeing their progress. Being here in SPED classes, I tell myself, 'If I don't teach here, who will?'" [P9, lines 3101–3104]

Showing a profound sense of purpose and dedication. SPED teachers' pride in their students' achievements underscores their belief in the meaningful impact of their work.

Theme 2: Passion for Teaching

SPED teachers are driven by their passion, which fuels their commitment to fostering growth and learning in the classroom, even in the face of personal and professional challenges. As one teacher expressed:

"So, if we talk about commitment, I feel truly committed to being here. For me, it's essential that I am present, regardless of anything else. Even if I'm not feeling well, I still go to school because I genuinely want to meet my students. Even though sometimes they can be quite stubborn." [P6, lines 2073–2078]

Highlighting the importance of being present for their students, regardless of personal struggles. SPED teachers find meaning in small, everyday acts of support, such as helping students feel valued and loved. One participant shared:

"Well, those are just simple things that you can help them with to improve, even just a little bit. I guess that's what I can say is a meaningful experience for them. And being able to help them feel loved, even though they have their challenges." [P4, lines 1058–1061]

Emphasizing the profound impact of making students feel accepted and loved. These acts reflect their deep sense of care and acceptance, underscoring the importance of fostering positive teacher-student relationships and promoting students' well-being. Widana et al. (2023) emphasize that a strong commitment to responsibilities enhances teachers' effectiveness in performing their duties.

Additionally, Amerstorfer and Munster-Kistner (2021) emphasized the importance of creating a supportive learning environment, which aligns with Langher et al. (2017) focus on ensuring students feel secure and valued. As one teacher noted:

"Your love and acceptance for the children, regardless of their appearance, is essential. It's about making them feel that love – that's all it takes." [P5, lines 1591–1592]

Reinforcing the role of unconditional acceptance in creating a positive environment. Maryanti et al. (2021) and Aspelin (2020) also emphasized the importance of inclusivity and acceptance, underscoring the critical role SPED teachers play in recognizing students' individuality and fostering a nurturing educational experience. This collective commitment and passion ultimately serve as a foundation for both personal and academic growth in students.

Theme 3: Vocational Inspirations

The vocational inspirations of SPED teachers often extend beyond academic and emotional support, emphasizing a commitment to nurturing students' spiritual growth. Teachers view their role not simply as a profession but as a divine calling, requiring unwavering dedication and a deep love for their students. One teacher noted:

"What truly inspires me to be a SPED teacher is the opportunity to help these children, especially in supporting their spiritual growth" [P5, lines 1428–1430]

Highlighting the fulfillment they derive from fostering students' holistic development. This belief in a higher purpose aligns with the growing understanding that teaching, particularly in special education, transcends academics and aims to support spiritual well-being.

This sense of divine purpose is reflected in the teachers' view that their work is more than a job; it is a sacred responsibility. As one teacher shared:

"Being a SPED teacher is truly a gift from God. From my experience, not everyone wants to be a SPED teacher. I often encourage myself by thinking that perhaps God has placed me here for a reason. If I were with other teachers, they might not be able to handle it, even with training. The most important things are your commitment and love for the children" [P6, lines 1713–1720]

This sense of calling is echoed in literature that describes teaching, especially in special education, as a vocation that goes beyond professional duties (Norman, 2020, as cited by Mercado, 2023). Teachers find fulfillment not only in addressing academic and emotional needs but also in their role as spiritual guides for their students.

As highlighted in *Special Education from a Christian Perspective* (Thorsos, 2011), educators working with children with special needs view their work as a sacred service, entrusted with a unique and meaningful responsibility. These findings reinforce the critical role that spiritual motivation plays in the commitment of SPED teachers, who approach their work as a purposeful calling, driven by a deep sense of service and love for their students.

3.2 Challenges of SPED Teachers

SPED teachers, particularly those working with students in rural areas, face numerous professional challenges. From the gathered data, five (5) themes emerged, each highlighting different aspects of these challenges. These themes are discussed in the following sections:

Theme 1. Inadequate Professional Skills

SPED teachers are deeply engaged in the complex nature of their roles, which involve addressing the diverse educational needs of students with disabilities. A significant aspect of this challenge is the requirement to teach specialized skills that necessitate careful memorization and consistent practice. Despite attending various seminars and training sessions, many SPED teachers still feel inadequate in their professional skills. One teacher noted:

"So, maybe it's still a lack of skills. Just because we teach SPED doesn't mean we know everything. We might still lack the skills and strategies. Even though we've had a lot of seminars and training sessions, we still need more." [P1, lines 90–93]

Highlighting the persistent feeling of inadequacy despite multiple professional development opportunities. This sense of inadequacy aligns with Kilag et al. (2024), who emphasized the critical importance of teacher training and professional development in equipping educators to meet the needs of students with disabilities. However, limited training opportunities may contribute to these feelings. Additionally, effective communication with students remains a significant challenge. One participant reflected:

"How will I communicate correctly with these pupils? How will they... understand me? And how will I understand them?" [P1, lines 20–22]

Underscoring the difficulty in establishing adequate mutual understanding with students. This concern is reflected in the findings of Picardal and Sanchez (2022), who identified communication barriers and a lack of resources as significant obstacles in delivering effective special education. These findings highlight the challenges SPED teachers face in acquiring specialized skills and promoting effective communication with their students.

Theme 2. Classroom Management

SPED teachers are tasked with creating a productive learning environment despite various obstacles. One of the most significant challenges they face is managing disruptive behaviors, such as tantrums and meltdowns, which can occur unexpectedly in the classroom. As one teacher shared:

"That's the most challenging part as a teacher. You have an objective for the day. Let me give you an example. Your objective for the day is to sort colors, for instance. But as soon as they come in, they start having a tantrum. They cry and don't want to do what you asked them to do." [P1, lines 286–290]

This difficulty in achieving classroom objectives aligns with the findings of Gatera et al. (2023), who emphasize that managing disruptive behavior and emotional outbursts of students with special needs is a particularly challenging aspect of their work. In addition to behavioral challenges, SPED teachers must adjust to the slower pace of learning that special needs students often require. A deliberate pace and extra time for clarification are necessary to support these students effectively, which is consistent with Gatera et al.'s (2023) findings that students with special needs often struggle with poor comprehension during class discussions.

Moreover, absenteeism among students with special needs further exacerbates these challenges. SPED teachers expressed concerns about the impact of student absenteeism on their ability to keep students on track with their learning goals. One teacher noted:

"Our problem is the students' absenteeism, especially the special needs kids. Even if they are like that, they still don't want to come to school, so they miss out on learning important skills." [P2, lines 669–672]

This issue resonates with Gottfried et al. (2019), who found that students with emotional disturbances tend to exhibit high rates of chronic absenteeism, which negatively affects their academic progress.

Theme 3. Managing Parental Involvement

The third theme identified as a challenge for SPED teachers is managing parental involvement. Teachers frequently face frustration when parents are in denial about their children's conditions, which undermines collaboration and the support students receive at home. As one teacher noted:

"Most of the parents, or some of them, are in denial. They don't accept their children's situation. So if they don't accept it, what can you do as a teacher? The parents won't help you." [P1, lines 82–85]

Without parental cooperation, teachers struggle to address students' needs and promote their development thoroughly. Moreover, the lack of consistent parental involvement, such as reinforcing classroom lessons or ensuring regular attendance, limits the effectiveness of teaching. As another participant shared:

Our biggest need is support from the parents. Whatever you teach here, they should continue it at home. Because if we teach them here, but they don't continue it at home, it won't make a difference." [P4, lines 1247–1250]

Teachers emphasized the difficulty of coordinating with parents to ensure students receive the necessary attention and care at home, which can hinder the overall success of special education programs. Parental acceptance and involvement are essential for the success of special education, as they encourage collaboration between parents and teachers and help create a supportive learning environment tailored to students' needs (Kilag et al., 2024). Adams et al. (2016) stated that the underlying assumption of teacher-parent collaboration in special education practices is that everyone who has a stake in a child's life, including parents and teachers, should work together to provide that child with the best education possible. Engaging parents in their child's education fosters a sense of teamwork and shared responsibility, both of which are critical for overcoming challenges and achieving optimal outcomes for students (Ybañez et al., 2024). Despite these challenges, SPED teachers remain dedicated to promoting open communication and fostering stronger parent-teacher partnerships.

Theme 4. Financial Constraints

The financial challenges faced by SPED teachers emerged as a critical barrier to effectively supporting their students. Many teachers expressed a pressing need for better resources and dedicated spaces, such as resource rooms, to cater to the diverse needs of their students. As one teacher mentioned:

"They should also be given support there... we hope they can create their own resource room for SPED, just like we have. Unlike here, we have a pupil from the far barangay, which is really far away." [P7, lines 2492–2495]

This finding aligns with previous studies, which highlight the importance of sufficient instructional materials and specialized resources for the success of SPED programs (Kilag et al., 2024). Despite some financial support from local governments, school divisions, and educational institutions, this support remains inadequate to meet the

full range of student needs, particularly in terms of medical assessments and other essential services. As one teacher shared:

"What kind of support? Financial? Well, we do have some financial support, but maybe we need more – something like that. Because these children also need assessments from doctors, but some of them don't have money. So where will we get it?" [P1, lines 229–235]

As noted by Balading et al. (2023), the lack of financial backing and the insufficient salaries of SPED teachers further exacerbate the challenges they face, as many teachers are forced to shoulder the cost of classroom materials themselves. Moreover, the challenge of reaching students in remote areas adds another layer of complexity to the financial burden. Teachers often personally fund transportation costs to ensure their students can attend school. One teacher explained:

"We have to spend our own money to be there... because it's better than sacrificing many just for one." [P9, lines 2951–2966]

This reflects the broader issue of limited access to educational resources in rural regions, as teachers struggle to ensure their students can overcome geographic and financial barriers to education (Agbon & Mina, 2019). This reinforces the critical need for increased financial support and resources to ensure that SPED teachers can provide the level of care and education their students deserve. While some support exists, the ongoing financial challenges highlight the need for a more robust allocation of resources to meet the diverse needs of students in special education settings.

Theme 5. Concerns in the Work Environment

The environment plays a crucial role in the well-being and professional fulfilment of SPED teachers. A toxic work environment, characterized by escalating minor issues, lack of support, and workplace bullying, can lead to frustration and isolation, exacerbating the challenges of teaching students with special needs. One teacher shared:

"I really felt that the environment was toxic. Even small issues could become big problems, and they significantly affected my ability to work effectively. When your mental stability is affected, it can reach a point where you're not stable anymore. You start to question if you belong here." [P9, lines 2936–2946]

Research has shown that work-related stressors, such as anger, anxiety, and frustration, are prevalent among teachers (Pressley et al., 2021). SPED teachers, in particular, face additional stressors due to the unique behaviors and needs of their students, which can increase stress and contribute to burnout (Sutjiono et al., 2020; Santos, 2012), further affecting their work.

Additionally, managing disruptive behaviors and emotional outbursts from students intensifies these challenges. As one participant reflected:

"But the hardest support of all is from your co-teachers. Their understanding about inclusion is lacking. Sometimes, they get upset if they have special children in their classroom... They don't realize that we are now in an inclusive environment." [P6, lines 1962–1970]

The lack of collaboration and understanding from colleagues, especially when mainstream teachers underestimate the complexities of special education, deepens the sense of isolation. This misunderstanding can leave SPED teachers feeling unsupported and isolated, exacerbating the stress they face.

This environment not only impacts teachers' mental and physical health but also hinders their ability to support student outcomes. Research has shown that teacher well-being is directly linked to student success (Herman et al., 2017). As SPED teachers struggle with these environmental factors, addressing such challenges becomes essential to ensuring the practical support of both SPED teachers and their students. Fostering a healthier, more collaborative, and productive educational environment is necessary for the continued success of both teachers and students in special education settings.

3.3 Coping Mechanisms of SPED Teachers

SPED teachers, especially those in diverse educational settings, often encounter significant challenges requiring adaptive strategies. From the data collected, four (4) themes emerged, each shedding light on the various coping mechanisms employed by SPED teachers to navigate their demanding roles. These themes are explored in the following sections:

Theme 1. Accommodating Professional Development

SPED teachers prioritize continuous learning to enhance their skills and address the evolving needs of their students. They engage in professional development through formal training, such as sign language workshops, and self-directed learning, including the use of online resources to support learners with visual impairments. This commitment to professional growth reflects their dedication to staying relevant and effective in their roles.

Moreover, teachers demonstrated a proactive approach to learning by being resourceful and seeking external support. As one participant explained:

"I invited an instructor from Holy Cross in Davao, who offers SPED courses... as a SPED teacher, you need to be resourceful so you have things to teach" [P9, lines 2861–2867]

Teachers also rely on self-directed learning through digital channels, such as subscribing to educational platforms on visual impairments, as noted by another teacher:

"I'm searching and subscribing to channels about ESD and learners with visual impairment... Through that, I can learn little by little and apply what I learn" [P1, lines 3014–3018]

These ongoing strategies – attending formal training, being resourceful, and engaging in self-directed learning – demonstrate how SPED teachers actively accommodate their professional development. This commitment ensures they remain relevant, adaptable, and effective in their roles, contributing to both their personal growth and the success of their students. As Allam and Martin (2021) highlight, advanced training is crucial for meeting the diverse needs of students, while Alcantara (2019) underscores that specialized training enables teachers to create inclusive and equitable learning environments. These strategies exemplify how ongoing professional development strengthens teachers' abilities to support their students and adapt to the challenges of special education.

Theme 2. Employing Alternative Teaching Strategies

SPED teachers employ various alternative learning strategies to cater to the diverse needs of their students, ensuring effective and inclusive education. By simplifying lessons, adjusting teaching methods, and utilizing appropriate resources, they create a supportive environment that promotes mastery through repetition while preventing students from feeling overwhelmed. Additionally, practical life skills, such as using an abacus or performing household chores, are integrated into lessons to prepare students for independence. As one teacher noted:

"For those who have profound difficulties, it is really important to go over things repeatedly until they learn something" [P3, lines 797-799]

These strategies reflect the emphasis on differentiated instruction and adaptability, as highlighted by Granziera et al. (2019) and Onyishi and Sefotho (2020), who argued that flexibility in teaching is essential for addressing the unique needs of students.

Furthermore, Hockley and Hemmings (2001) found that adaptable teachers are more likely to implement effective practices. As one participant shared:

"We purchase materials from SNED, but we use them here for our lessons with the children... it's fine as long as they are applicable to our children" [P7, lines 2380-2384]

Lariba (2023) also emphasizes that coping mechanisms, such as maintaining a positive mindset and engaging in ongoing research, contribute to teachers' professional growth and enhance educational outcomes. These strategies

underscore the dedication of SPED teachers to provide personalized education that meets their students' needs, fostering a conducive learning environment that empowers students to succeed despite their unique challenges.

Theme 3. Teaching Life Skills

The emphasis on teaching life skills to SPED students reflects the educators' commitment to fostering independence and equipping students with practical tools for success. Life skills instruction, including personal care, household chores, and financial management, ensures that students are prepared for life beyond the classroom. As one participant shared:

"We limit them to just focusing on household chores, even if it's just taking care of themselves... the goal is for them to grow up without their parents having to suffer or struggle" [P7, lines 2201-2204]

Teaching life skills requires immense patience, as it often involves repetitive instruction to ensure mastery, especially for students with severe disabilities (Masters in Special Education Degree Program Guide, 2021). One participant explained how they start with foundational skills, like using an abacus for math, and later extend instruction to financial tasks like handling money, underscoring the long-term value of life skills education:

"We taught them how to use an abacus to add, subtract, and multiply, and later on, how to handle money" [P2, lines 525-527]

Additionally, teaching essential social skills, such as greetings, is crucial for enhancing students' ability to connect with others, thereby improving their social integration (Sang, 2022). As the University of North Dakota (2024) notes, students rely on teachers to guide them through both academic and social challenges. By focusing on life skills, SPED teachers not only support students' academic development but also prepare them for meaningful participation in society.

Theme 4. Opportunities for collaboration

In SPED, collaboration among colleagues is essential for enhancing teaching effectiveness and overcoming challenges. SPED teachers engage in open discussions, collaborate after class, and seek advice from more experienced colleagues. One teacher shared how they collaborate with other SPED teachers across regions through group chats and lock sessions to exchange resources and updates:

"We also have a group chat with all SPED teachers, where we share the latest updates in the field. The support from my co-teachers here is also important. We have lock sessions, where we update each other on what the Central Office is downloading for us" [P8, lines 2705-2708, 2724-2726]

Additionally, teachers regularly consult seasoned educators to refine their lesson plans and strategies:

"I ask for advice, like, 'Is my lesson plan okay?' Should I do a demo? Is this suitable for my students?' I consult with those who are more experienced" [P7, lines 2452-2454]

As noted by Cook and Friend (2017), co-teachers engage in collaborative problem-solving and decision-making, which is essential in designing programs and services tailored to the unique needs of diverse student groups. The U.S. Department of Education (2010) emphasizes that effective collaboration involves a partnership among teachers, parents, and students, illustrating the integral role this teamwork plays in educational success. This support strengthens SPED teachers' ability to provide quality education and navigate the complexities of the profession.

4.0 Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate the motivations, challenges, and coping mechanisms experienced by SPED teachers in rural areas of Sarangani, offering critical insights into their professional and personal landscapes. Guided by established theoretical frameworks, this research provides a nuanced understanding of how these educators manage their roles, navigating both intrinsic and extrinsic factors to create inclusive and supportive learning environments for students with special needs.

The motivations of SPED teachers are deeply connected to Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (2000), particularly its Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) and Relation Motivation Theory (RMT). These teachers derive profound intrinsic satisfaction from their students' progress, fulfilling their psychological needs for competence and relatedness. Their passion for making a meaningful difference in the lives of their students is further strengthened by their sense of purpose, often rooted in spiritual beliefs. This intrinsic motivation not only fosters resilience but also enables teachers to persevere in the face of significant challenges. From a psychological perspective, this study reinforces the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation in SPED teachers, as it aligns with research emphasizing the positive impact of relatedness, competence, and purpose on professional well-being and effectiveness.

Challenges faced by SPED teachers are multifaceted and resonate with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST), which highlights the interplay between individuals and their environments. In rural areas, limited resources, financial constraints, and inadequate systemic support disrupt the professional ecosystem, leaving SPED teachers isolated and underserved. The lack of collaboration within the mesosystem, such as the schools and communities, and gaps in the macrosystem, which can be associated with the policy and funding, exacerbate these challenges, hindering their ability to support their students fully. It is recommended that government agencies increase targeted funding for rural SPED programs, ensuring access to teaching aids, facilities, and assistive technologies. School leadership should also strengthen partnerships with local communities and NGOs to enhance support networks for both teachers and students.

To cope with these challenges, SPED teachers adopt diverse strategies, reflecting their adaptability and dedication. They rely on emotional regulation, reframing stressors, and seeking support from colleagues to manage the demands of their roles. Professional development opportunities, tailored to their specific needs, enable them to enhance their skills and address feelings of inadequacy, while alternative teaching strategies ensure that their students receive personalized support. Training providers should design SPED-specific workshops and mentorship programs that address both pedagogical challenges and emotional resilience.

Moreover, schools should institutionalize regular mental health check-ins, support groups, and structured planning time for SPED teachers to collaborate and decompress. In the field of psychology, this study advances the application of SDT, particularly its mini theories BPNT and RMT, and EST in educational settings, particularly for SPED teachers working in rural areas. It underscores how intrinsic motivation and relatedness can drive resilience and effectiveness, while also highlighting the detrimental impact of systemic barriers on teacher well-being and performance. The findings offer practical implications for interventions designed to support educators, highlighting the role of psychological theories in shaping educational policies and practices.

This research sheds light on the resilience and motivation of teachers, highlighting how they remain committed despite facing challenges. By identifying the psychological and systemic factors shaping their experiences, it emphasizes the need for supportive environments that help teachers thrive. Stakeholders must take a holistic and coordinated approach—linking national policy, school-based initiatives, and professional development efforts—to create sustainable support systems for SPED educators in rural areas.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors distributed the workload equally to develop this research. Christine, as the group leader, oversaw the entire study process. Together with her are Bill, Faith, and Pearl, who contributed by editing the entire study, searching for related literature to support the arguments and findings, and assisting in the conduct of interviews with the participants. Sir Darwin, as the research adviser, imparted his knowledge on conceptualization and provided feedback to improve the study's write-up.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

There is no conflict of interest in the conduct of the study.

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