

Lived Experiences of Physical Education Teachers Handling Students with Special Needs

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Abstract. This study explored the lived experiences of Physical Education (PE) teachers handling students with Special Needs. It utilized Colaizzi's phenomenological approach and a purposive sampling technique in identifying the seven (7) PE teachers from public and private schools. It also used a face-to-face interview with the participants in their respective schools to collect data. The study revealed four emergent themes: confronting training shortages, transformative commitment to inclusive and equitable education, relational support, and disparity in access to diagnostic and medical services. Teachers often cited communication challenges with LSENs, lack of appropriate inclusive resources and facilities, and insufficient training and expertise. Despite these challenges, teachers' adaptability through implementing individualized strategies demonstrates their commitment to inclusive education. Furthermore, the study's findings highlighted the need for teacher training, resource allocation, and policy implementation to address inclusive education disparities.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Physical education teachers; Students with special needs.

1.0 Introduction

The role of physical education (PE) teachers is crucial in fostering the overall development of students, impacting their cognitive abilities, physical growth, and social skills through PE programs. Inclusive Physical Education and physical activity initiatives in schools are designed to provide equal opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities (McNamara & Pan, 2021; Pocock & Miyahara, 2017). Inclusive school environments cultivate attitudes, values, and skills necessary for diverse societal integration (Leijen et al., 2021). Teachers contribute to inclusive education by designing adaptive educational strategies, encouraging collaboration, and utilizing available resources (Triviño-Amigo et al., 2023). These collaborative efforts, such as the positive attitudes of PE teachers towards inclusion (Alhumaid et al., 2022) and the inclusive education program emphasizing the need for improved physical education facilities for all students (Nuñez, 2021; UNESCO, 2005), play a vital role in educational systems.

The adapted PE program in the Philippines has moderately met its objective, particularly in promoting teacher competencies and addressing various learning domains (Estrella, 2020). However, working with students who have disabilities has been reported to cause tension and anxiety in many PE teachers (Von Haaren-Mack et al., 2019). Teachers reportedly fear inadvertently causing harm to students during physical activities or of being unprepared to accommodate diverse students, which often leads to emotional distress (Catellani et al., 2018). While Filipino teachers encounter numerous challenges, many are adopting an

inclusive curriculum, and teachers have broadened their understanding and enhanced their teaching abilities (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). Additionally, teachers use various methods to measure student progress in an inclusive setting. Adjusting teaching methods and materials enables students with disabilities to succeed and develop the physical strength, stamina, and skills needed to maintain lifelong activity (Estrella, 2020). These methods include regular assessments, observational techniques, and feedback from students and parents.

Nevertheless, despite the growing focus on inclusive education to enhance the development of students with special educational needs, there is still a significant lack of research, specifically in Physical Inclusive Education. Most existing studies have primarily focused on the preparatory stages of inclusive education (Jimenez, 2025; Triviño-Amigo et al., 2023; Zwane & Malale, 2018), while the practical challenges encountered by PE teachers during actual implementation have remained less explored. This oversight might directly affect the success of inclusive education implementation, particularly in Physical Education due to its emphasis on physical activities and social interaction.

The researcher of the current study has observed that LSENs are becoming more prevalent across both private and public schools in the Philippines. However, she has also noticed that only a few teachers truly understand the importance of accommodating these students in PE contexts. Given the societal responsibility to celebrate diversity, she perceives this situation as a critical concern. She also acknowledges that schools are key in delivering quality, inclusive education for all students, regardless of their unique learning needs and differences. Therefore, this study sought to fill the gap by examining teachers' lived experiences working with learners with special needs (LSENs) in Physical Inclusive Education. By capturing their firsthand insights, this study provided practical and context-specific recommendations to improve the integration of inclusive practices in physical education settings.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The phenomenological method used in this study was popularized by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) (Creswell, 2007). Exploring and comprehending people's experiences in daily life are done through phenomenology. In this study, the researcher particularly utilized Colaizzi's approach to data interpretation. She examined a phenomenon from a pre-reflective perspective, regardless of whether it is real or imagined, objectively measurable or subjective. Therefore, to perform phenomenology, the researcher must have in-depth discussions with their subjects to enter their world and access their experiences. Investigating subjective phenomena is made possible by phenomenology, which is based on the idea that people's lived experiences serve as the foundation for essential reality truths. According to Praveena and Sasikumar (2021), phenomenology is a research method intended to explore people's experiences as they move through different phases of life. It is exploratory and descriptive, and the focus of analysis, as emphasized by Ravindran (2019), is to uncover the tacit meanings that people attach to their actions and responses related to the phenomenon.

2.2 Research Locale

The study participants were chosen purposively based on the inclusion criteria and the phenomenon being studied. Purposive or judgmental sampling is a type of non-probability sampling based on the belief that the researcher's knowledge about the population can hand-pick sample members (Polit & Beck, 2013). In the current study, the researcher selected the teachers she believes have substantial knowledge, experience, and expertise in inclusive education. Among the criteria used to choose the sample is the requirement that each participant has experienced the phenomenon and must be able to describe the experience in words. PE teachers who work with LSENs in various private and public schools in Dumaguete City are the participants of this investigation. All participants were interviewed until data saturation was attained.

2.3 Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview was utilized as the sole instrument for gathering data. Open-ended questions, worded in English, were used to elicit significant statements from the interviewees. These inquiries are intended to clarify the topic under investigation. The interviews were audio-recorded using a mobile phone. Additionally,

the researcher maintained a journal to record observations and comments during the process.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

The data was gathered between April and May 2023. Before the interview, a letter of request to conduct the study was sent to the Dean of the Graduate School of Foundation University. Afterward, the signed and approved request was submitted to the division superintendent of Dumaguete City. Once the superintendent approves, the request is presented to the principals of the schools where the selected PE teachers teach. In private schools, a letter to the administrators or the principal was sent before it was presented to the teachers. After securing the letters, the researcher did a mock interview and bracketing. Afterward, the researcher identified the teachers based on the inclusion criteria. The researcher then talked to the teacher personally and arranged an interview appointment with each participant based on the latter's preferred day and time so they could express themselves without inhibitions. The participants were guaranteed complete secrecy and received a detailed explanation of the nature and goal of the study.

Each participant also signed the informed consent form. They also emphasized that the information exchange was captured on a cellphone recorder and that they could end the interview if they felt uncomfortable. The researcher's primary responsibility during the interview was to listen intently to everything the participant said and intervene only to clarify. In addition, the researcher guided the participants regarding specific themes that surfaced throughout the interview. The study's researcher also took notes or kept records of verbal and non-verbal cues shown by the participants during the interview. The notes, along with the participants' demographic information (i.e., age, sex), were kept in a journal. Usually, the duration of each interview depends on the participant's extent of engagement. In this study, the interviews lasted between a minimum of 20 minutes and a maximum of an hour. Lastly, the recorded and transcribed materials underwent validity checks to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed data.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The researcher implemented all the necessary ethical considerations throughout the study. The researcher ensured that the participants' identities and the confidentiality of their statements were maintained. Above all, there was ample opportunity for the participants to share their stories without needless interruptions from the researcher. Scheef and Buyserie (2020) revealed in their study that participant identity remained unknown to the researchers as the stripping of personal information allowed for anonymity. For confidentiality and anonymity, a code was assigned to each participant. The hard copies of the data gathered from the participants were kept in locked file cabinets, while the soft copies were stored in password-protected computers.

3.0 Results and Discussion

After thoroughly analyzing the transcripts, the researcher extracted several emergent themes that encapsulated the participants' lived experiences.

3.1 Overcoming Educational Hurdles

The first theme captures the difficulties participants faced in teaching inclusive Physical Education. Some participants shared their struggles, patiently explaining concepts to LSEs and determining the most effective instructional approaches. After their in-depth interviews, the participants typically expressed similar opinions regarding their issues. Most of the participants admitted they lacked the necessary training. They also mentioned the difficulty of giving instructions because of the lack of preparation and references appropriate for LSEs.

Under this first emergent theme are four sub-themes, namely: a) Confronting Training Shortages; b) Approaches to Inclusivity; c) Surmounting Communication Obstacles; d) Pedagogical Pathways; and e) Access to Educational Resources.

Confronting Training Shortages

This theme illustrates the inadequate training of PE teachers. Lack of training leads to inconsistent implementation of inclusive practices. Most of the participants expressed their doubts about whether the LSEs understood the instructions given to them. They often feel less prepared to meet the needs of these students. Participants described the challenges they encountered.

"It is not easy for me because I do not have any background in teaching students with special needs, but I do not have a choice but to cater to them because they are included in my class, so it is a challenge." (P1)

"Teaching students with special needs is very challenging, ma'am. It takes much patience, yes, because you need to make them involved or let them engage in your activities, and of course, they have special needs, so you must cater to them." (P4).

The participants' responses underscore the importance of training and equipping teachers with the necessary skills to effectively handle and support students with special needs. This finding aligns with the study by Masongsong et al. (2023), which emphasizes that the successful implementation of inclusive education depends mainly on the preparedness of educators. For inclusion to be realized, teachers must be empowered change agents, equipped with the essential values, skills, and attitudes that enable every student to succeed (Baguisa & Ang-Manaig, 2021).

Approaches to Inclusivity

One of the significant challenges reported by the participants was the difficulty in implementing learning strategies that catered to the diverse needs of all students. Appropriate strategies should be considered in the context of inclusive education. However, the findings of this study revealed that participants possessed limited knowledge of inclusivity. Consequently, some teachers faced difficulties effectively delivering lessons to accommodate students with special educational needs.

"I am sorry, but another thing that I would do is let them open their notes, except for those without disabilities. Still, it is the same; even if they open their notes, they still have difficulty." (P1)

"For example, some students have low comprehension. So, we should give them more time. Others also need to have instructional aids with larger letters for them to be able to read. They all have differences that must be catered to." (P3)

To ensure the successful implementation of inclusive education, teachers must feel prepared to incorporate inclusive practices into their classroom teachings (Krischler et al., 2019). Consistent with (Sánchez et al., 2021), teachers in this study also identified physical barriers, curriculum limitations, and insufficient teacher training as key challenges hindering significant inclusive instruction, particularly in the context of Physical Education, where demands for physical activities and social interaction increase the complexity of inclusion.

Surmounting Communication Obstacles

The participants described their challenges in teaching LSENs due to lacking background or formal training in inclusive education. A recurring issue was the struggles in communicating directly with students with hearing impairments or other disabilities, as the teachers lack knowledge of sign language or other specialized communication methods. Participant 1 described her experience communicating with her student with hearing impairments in the interview.

"One of the basic challenges is that I cannot communicate with them directly because I do not know sign language, which could have been a great help." (P1)

"First of all, handling these kinds of students is very tasky and hard to deal with because they have different things that we need to cater to. Just for example, one of our students here is autistic, so we are having a hard time communicating and giving instructions about the things that we let him do." (P7)

Based on the participants' responses, it is evident that communication with students, particularly those with special education needs, poses a significant challenge in Physical Education contexts. These findings are supported by Goldfeld et al. (2021), who emphasized that intensive teacher training on communication strategies has repeatedly been shown to improve teachers' knowledge and overall instructional competence. Similarly, Wasik and Hindman (2020) and Egert et al. (2020) found that adequate training enhances the quality of teacher-child interactions and the ability to provide meaningful instructional support. In the Philippine context, Cubillo (2024) further highlighted that many educators lack training in effective communication strategies for students with disabilities, which often leads to misunderstandings and ineffective teaching

practices.

Pedagogical Pathways

The participants shared that their experiences concerning the curriculum implementation and classroom activities involved specific modifications to accommodate students with special educational needs. They reported adapting their teaching methods and strategies better to support the learning of students with diverse needs.

"For example, some students have low comprehension. So, we should give them more time. Others also need to have instructional aids with larger letters for them to be able to read. They all have differences that must be catered to." (P3)

"It is not easy because books are not even available to them. We keep practicing Inclusive Education, but books, materials, and tools for students are unavailable. We have trainings and seminars, although we learn from them, yet how about teaching physical education? How are we supposed to cater to them?" (P5)

The findings of this study emphasized the crucial role of accessible, flexible, and responsive educational resources for the effectiveness of inclusive practices, regardless of students' abilities or disabilities. The participants frequently cited the lack of appropriate and specialized learning materials as a significant barrier to inclusion, particularly in Physical Education. This observation supports Miller's (2020) assertion that Physical Education teachers' role within inclusive education is to create lessons for students with differing abilities and learning styles to ensure understanding and participation.

Access to Educational Resources

This theme discusses the lack of equipment and facilities to cater to students with special needs. The participants' statements implied that the availability of various equipment and adaptable facilities is crucial for creating an inclusive learning environment in physical education. They argued that the lack of appropriate equipment and facilities can present a significant challenge to the effective implementation of inclusive physical education.

"The challenge is that we lack experience and facilities. It would be better if there were facilities available for these particular students so that they can receive proper care and training." (P2)

"This is what it is now, from what I have seen here, the ramp. Maybe next year, an elevator will be specifically for students with special needs. That would benefit them, especially those in wheelchairs, so they will not struggle anymore, especially when going to the field." (P5)

The study revealed that most schools do not have adapted equipment necessary to support LSENs in Physical Education. Participants asserted the importance of safety among students with a disability or those with visual impairments while using this adapted equipment. They believed that the lack of adapted equipment has led to the exclusion of LSENs from practical PE lessons and other sporting activities, primarily due to safety concerns and the risk of injury. Parallel to these findings, Akinyi et al. (2015) also found that the lack of teaching and learning materials such as textbooks, talking calculators, braille machines, large prints, compact discs, and other sports equipment undermines the success of inclusive education. This study affirmed that the absence of appropriate resources prevents schools from offering equitable learning opportunities for LSENs, particularly in Physical Education.

3.2 Transformative Commitment to Inclusive and Equitable Education

In this theme, teachers aim to cultivate inclusive mindsets and practices to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities. This ensures that all students, regardless of their physical or intellectual abilities, have access to physical education that develops their physical, mental, and social well-being. Three themes encompass this emergent theme. These are: a) Unwavering Dedication to Inclusive Practices; b) Vital Importance of Ensuring Education for All; c) Approaching Challenges as Opportunities for Growth; and d) Inspiration for Professional Advancement.

Unwavering Dedication to Inclusive Practices

Participants in this theme stressed the significance of inclusive education, emphasizing that one size does

not fit all and that each student requires tailored support. Inclusive education ensures that all students, including those with disabilities and special needs, have equal access to physical education.

"There is only one curriculum; no curriculum fits them perfectly, so we must modify it for our students with special needs as teachers because one size does not fit all. You must tailor it to suit each child." (P3)

The participant's statement could be linked with Kushartanti's (2018) findings that inclusive physical education and various modifications in the learning process must be conducted to achieve the established goals. The adaptive physical education learning model is preferably arranged to adjust to students' disabilities. Access to physical education, physical activity, or sports programs is essential for students with special needs to grow and develop, especially in developing all their potential to be ready to have an independent life.

Vital Importance of Ensuring Education for All

The participants showed commitment to inclusive education and ensured the successful implementation of inclusive practices. They expressed their approach to addressing the needs of every student and emphasized the importance of equal opportunity for all.

"Yes, I make sure that there is no special treatment. They are treated equally, and they feel that they are the same as the other students." (P1)

"I have experienced special education, at least, and I am constantly challenged to be more prepared than usual because I have these students who need it. My teaching is more challenging than the other classes, so I must be more prepared." (P3)

The participants in this expressed their clear intention to treat LSENs equitably, regardless of their background, ensuring they all feel included in the classroom. One participant further reflected on the additional effort required to meet the needs of LSENs. These findings align with Fernandez et al. (2021), who emphasized that teachers are responsible for achieving inclusive education, as they must organize the educational response, design and develop personalized educational practices, motivate students, work collaboratively, and use different resources and technologies. Similarly, Pocock and Miyahara (2017) asserted that no matter a student's background, ability, or identity, teachers play a crucial part in embracing and instructing them.

Approaching Challenges as Opportunities for Growth

Despite the challenges faced by the PE teachers, they continue to support and accommodate the needs of every student. Participants devoted their efforts to their strategies to deliver lessons effectively. Most of them applied techniques that they think suit the students' capacities. These strategies or techniques stem from their observation of the students' behavior. Participant 3 added:

"Handling Special Education is wonderful. It is challenging and inspiring. You can make a difference if you have an open heart and an open mind. You must embrace it." (P3)

"Ahhh, my experience here is very challenging at first since I am just a regular teacher teaching regular students. I am not really into teaching students with special needs, but once you get to know them, you will love them." (P4)

The participants' narratives revealed that while most teachers began with limited exposure to inclusive education, this does not deter them from striving to fulfill their role. These findings are supported by Azubuike et al. (2023); educators need to know how to adapt physical education to meet the specific needs of individuals with disabilities. This service involves modifying physical education to ensure safety and address the unique developmental needs of each child with impairments.

Inspiration for Professional Growth

This theme emphasizes the significant factor of having trained teachers in Inclusive Education. PE teachers' lack of training in inclusive education highlights this as a substantial barrier to implementing inclusive practices in PE classes. The participants revealed that training solves their challenges while handling diverse students, including those with disabilities, in a mainstream classroom. They believed teachers must be equipped with skills and teaching strategies appropriate for these learners.

"It would be much better if incoming teachers, particularly MAPEH teachers, are trained by the institution, especially public schools under DepEd, so that whenever there are students with special needs, they know how to cater to them and treat them differently as much as possible." (P2)

"It would be better if all teachers were trained. Ideally, all teachers should be trained, regardless of the subject." (P2)

The responses from the participants suggested the urgent need for action to address the lack of training among physical education teachers. Similarly, Azubuike et al. (2023) revealed that PE teachers possess limited knowledge and are inadequately prepared to teach students with disabilities. As a result, some teachers felt that they were not professionally prepared to deal with LSENs, demotivating them to modify lessons and activities to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This implied that the absence of specialized training for teachers, particularly in Physical Education, affected teachers' confidence and limited teaching inclusivity.

3.3 Relational Support

The third theme discusses how the participants recognized the need to collaborate with parents and specialists to support special needs students better. The participants consulted the parents' practices at home, which could also be applied in school. Under this, two themes emerged: a) Unified Efforts of Teachers and Parents; and b) Peer Support.

Unified Efforts of Teachers and Parents

The participants emphasized that collaboration between parents and schools is essential for creating an inclusive environment that supports the diverse needs of all students. They also highlighted the importance of parental involvement in the success of Inclusive Education.

"Involved in a gym activity with his parents' permission." Involve them in the activities with his and his parents' permission." (P2)

"They are aware of their child's condition, so during that time, the mother told me, 'Ma'am, I need to, I need your help. If possible, Ma'am, we need you to extend your patience with my child because I know, Ma'am, that she is a slow learner. When you give her instructions, she still gets confused and will ask, 'What was that, Ma'am? How do I do that, Ma'am?'" (P5)

Participants recognized the importance of collaboration between parents and teachers as a fundamental principle to implement inclusive education. Parents and teachers are the primary stakeholders with whom children with learning difficulties interact daily (Grace & Carlo, 2023). On the other hand, Zezulková and Janků (2020) maintained that collaboration between schools and parents is a significant predictor of the successful inclusion of pupils in mainstream primary education. In this context, it is necessary to adjust communication with pupils' parents.

Peer Support

The involvement of classmates in assisting students with disabilities fosters a sense of belonging and enhances participation and engagement during activities.

"They are just given an assistant, and I also guide them through peer support to help and watch them because I cannot always be there to supervise." (P7)

"If there are performance tasks, since all of them are expected to perform in Physical Education classes, I always assign one student with an impairment to a particular group. I make sure that their classmates encourage them to participate. So even if they have difficulty with the task, it becomes easier because most of their group mates ensure that they also take part." (P1)

The findings of this study align with the existing studies emphasizing that students without disabilities provide academic and social support to peers with severe disabilities through peer support arrangements (Brock & Huber, 2017). Furthermore, the teachers' use of adapted tasks and patience reflects their growing awareness of

inclusivity. These practices resonate with the findings of Lindsey and McGuire (2021), who stressed the importance of adapting tasks and providing extended time to accommodate diverse learners. Additionally, the socialization and educational progress of students with special needs are positively influenced by their peers (Syla, 2023), a study that shows inclusive peer dynamics contribute to the overall outcomes for all learners.

3.4 Disparity in Access to Diagnostic and Medical Services

This theme highlights that students with special needs have different educational experiences in public and private schools due to differences in medical and diagnostic services. Many LSENs in public schools do not have official diagnoses, making it difficult for teachers to provide individualized educational help. This contrasts sharply with private institutions, where pupils usually have access to professional support and medical diagnoses, enabling more individualized and successful solutions. Under this, two themes emerged: a) Diagnostic Availability; and b) Socio-Economic factors.

Diagnosis Availability

Based on the participants' responses, it can be inferred that most public-school students with special needs have no doctor's diagnosis, making it challenging for teachers to craft an intervention. Although teachers know something is wrong with the students, they do not have the proper diagnosis.

"I have one student, I think he has ADHD, but I do not have any problem handling him. His voice gets suddenly loud sometimes, but I do not mind. I wonder what his impairment is because he looks normal." (P1)

"Because he suddenly raises his voice, he dislikes being disturbed. He mumbles to himself in his place but does not bother anyone and is not very disturbing. He has different needs. So, when I asked the adviser, that was the explanation." (P1)

These statements from the participants emphasized that most public-school students with special needs often lack formal diagnoses from medical professionals. This absence of medical diagnoses complicates teachers' ability to craft effective interventions. Existing studies, such as McLaughlin and Nolet (2020) and Hepburn (2019), noted that the lack of diagnosis creates significant barriers to accessing necessary support services, leading to inequities between public and private schools. Teachers frequently feel unprepared to handle students with unidentified needs, resulting in a reliance on generic strategies rather than targeted interventions (Avramidis & Norwich, 2019).

Socio-Economic Factors

Families earning more are more likely to afford private schooling and related medical treatments; hence, socioeconomic variables are essential. Although private school teachers gain from extra support and organized plans based on medical advice, public school teachers could find it challenging to meet the varied needs of pupils who are not yet diagnosed due to a lack of resources and training.

"We usually recommend to this student and parents that they should go to a special education school, like West City Central School, rather than here. However, some come here because of poverty, financial reasons, and the distance from home. That is why they do not go." (P2)

"One of the parents here, a parent of our learner, provided us with a specialist from Manila. Then we just had an online seminar where we were given different scenarios related to this disability." (P5)

The participants' accounts highlighted the disparity in the accessibility of educational and medical resources between public and private schools, primarily influenced by socioeconomic factors. Families with greater financial means are more likely to afford necessary medical evaluations and support, enabling teachers with structured and formal guidance. In contrast, public school teachers often struggle to meet the diverse needs of students who remain undiagnosed due to limited resources and inadequate training. For instance, Brew et al. (2021) found that other factors influencing students' academic performance include income, educational backgrounds, access to libraries and textbooks, availability of meals, and the quality of teachers, all of which significantly impact their academic outcomes. Similarly, Dangol and Lamichhane, B. (2024), reported that parents with children attending private schools perceived the quality of education more positively than parents of children in public schools. This situation underscores the urgent need for systemic changes to ensure that all

students, regardless of financial status, have equal access to essential medical and diagnostic resources that promote their learning and development.

4.0 Conclusion

Considering the findings of this inquiry, the researcher concludes that Physical Education teachers in private and public schools face significant challenges in accommodating students' diverse needs. These teachers emphasize the importance of using visual aids and modifying their activities and assessments to cater to their learners' needs. They also recognize the value of maintaining flexibility, adaptability, and a patient, empathetic approach to teaching. Additionally, the crucial support of parents, peers, adequate finances, and professional interventionists has been instrumental in helping every student with special needs succeed in their personal interests and academic endeavors. Thus, it is recommended that schools provide specialized resources, targeted teacher training, and family involvement coupled with community support to effectively create a responsive, inclusive educational environment where every learner can thrive.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors attest to their equal involvement in all aspects of this research. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this paper.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

This study has no conflict of interest of any sort.

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