

SPED Teachers: The Stories of Their Struggles in the New Normal Education

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has made considerable alterations and changes in educational approaches, affecting both teachers and students; hence, this research explored the challenges of SPED teachers and the stories behind the new normal education. This descriptive-phenomenological research focused on SPED teachers' challenges and coping methods. Individual interviews, conducted virtually and face-to-face, following the COVID-19 protocol, were conducted to explore the teaching adversities of SPED teachers in the new normal setup further. The researcher transcribed the interviews, of course, with the participants' consent. Thereafter, themes were found. The study identified the primary challenges SPED teachers experienced: lack of parental support, lack of technological expertise, overloaded teaching tasks, assessment of learning, integration of teaching pedagogy in distance learning, and remote intervention of a child's disability. Meanwhile, six themes were generated as teachers' coping strategies: parent-teacher partnership, self-motivation, professional development, and integration of effective strategies. The study also found that coping ways before and during the new context of education are still the same. The parent-teacher partnership was the most useful coping mechanism the SPED teachers applied to the new normal education. During the pandemic, SPED educators must enhance their technological expertise. Future studies should be conducted in other schools and divisions to enrich this study further.

Keywords: SPED teachers; Coping mechanisms; COVID-19; New normal.

1.0 Introduction

It was said that special education teachers have struggled for ages in teaching, even before the pandemic. Educators teaching children with unique needs did not receive enough support from the school, as they lacked the training needed to feel qualified to teach. The disparities caused them to have difficulties in dealing with learners with disabilities (Ajoc, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the global education structure, adopted a "new normal" learning model that uses various forms of remote learning and hybrid models, and adapted in-person classroom practices (Dhawan, 2020). Special education practitioners often face difficulties as their kinds of direct instruction and individualized teaching styles depend on certain face-to-face classroom practices. The complex factors challenge educators as they look for creative ways to provide equal and quality education to students with disabilities (Kaden, 2020).

A significant issue teachers face in the current situation is a demand for more resources and support, especially with the balance between traditional teaching methods and remote or hybrid instructional settings (Liu, 2021). Special education teachers face many new demands, including technological modifications, updated approaches to instruction, and more significant support needs from students and families (Crawford et al., 2021). Studies show

that this forced shift to virtual learning platforms has amplified the digital divide, with students with disabilities having the least access to digital devices and reliable internet connections. This disparity imposes further challenges on special education teachers, who must develop strategies to ensure learning accessibility for students, irrespective of their technology resources (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Additionally, they need help modifying their instructional materials for remote delivery while addressing the distinct needs of each student.

This study aimed to investigate the challenges some SPED teachers in Davao del Sur encountered in the current educational landscape and assess their impact on their capacity to provide quality education to students with disabilities. This study thoroughly examines teachers' experiences to identify the support needed to empower them to overcome challenges. Addressing these needs is essential for enhancing the well-being of teachers and ensuring that students with special needs receive inclusive and practical education in a rapidly evolving educational landscape. This research aims to discover the SPED teachers' challenges that uncovered the stories of their struggles in the new normal education and the coping mechanisms utilized to address these challenges.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This qualitative study utilized a descriptive-phenomenological research design, a prevalent methodology in qualitative research. A term that denotes how humans interpret a specific phenomenon. The method aimed to uncover the phenomenon's fundamental nature or essential structure under investigation (Colaizzi, 1978; Gumarang et al., 2021). The study's objective was to elucidate and interpret the essential meaning of a phenomenon from the viewpoint of individuals directly engaged with it. This represents the life-world experience characterized by the presence of consciousness, which is central to descriptive phenomenology. The findings encapsulate the essence of a phenomenon as perceived by an individual who has undergone the experience (e.g., the experience of healing). This pertains to the narratives of SPED educators within the context of the current educational landscape.

2.2 Research Participants

Creswell (2013), as cited in Salah (2015), indicates that a phenomenological study may be enhanced by a sample size of three to twenty-five participants. Fifteen participants were interviewed using purposive sampling. Educators are instructing distinct students from specific schools in Davao del Sur. This purposeful sampling ensured that these teachers had some formative experience in educating SPED students in this new normal context of education.

2.3 Data Gathering Procedures and Ethical Considerations

The researcher contacted the participants by initially providing a permission letter to ensure confidentiality. Subsequently, informed consent was sent to the participants, requesting their approval to participate in the study through online platforms such as Gmail and Messenger. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement and their right to withdraw from participation at any time. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher conducted online interviews via various platforms in light of health protocols and the scheduled interview time, which every interview session lasted an hour or almost. The researcher recorded the interview with the participant's consent to ensure accurate transcription and analysis of responses. Participant involvement was entirely voluntary and anonymous to ensure privacy protection. The interview guide question employed in this study is clear and comprehensible.

2.4 Data Analysis

The study process offers a thorough analysis, ensuring each step remains closely aligned with the data. The outcome will be a succinct yet comprehensive description of the phenomenon under investigation, validated through the participants. The methodology is based on the participants' narratives of their experiences. Data may be obtained from online interviews and other methods, including written narratives, blogs, and study diaries (Colaizzi, 1978, as cited in Morrow et al., 2015).

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Challenges of SPED Teachers before New Normal Education

Before the pandemic, the SPED educators were already combating hindrances. This presents the challenges of inclusive education teachers before the new normal were categorized into specific themes.

Lack of Parental Support

Many special education teachers indicate that inconsistency in parents' support influences their work directly, especially concerning the individualized plans and managing the behavior of students. Parents' involvement ensures this collective support system for the students; however, the barriers usually include distrust, poor communication, and purely practical difficulties that often hinder such efforts (Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2020). The same authors stated that parent knowledge and participation in special education resources are essential but often insufficient, adding further pressure on educators to fill these family engagement deficits. Lacking involvement also limits the communication between the school and home, which thwarts collaborative strategies such as consistent reinforcement of learning goals, shared problem-solving, and coordinated support services that are critical in the comprehensive development of a child. Before the new normal, special education teachers' primary challenge was communicating with parents. Participants commonly identified parental support as a crucial factor for the progress of uniquely able children. Regular communication with the parents of SPED students is essential for educators. Failure to address this issue will result in challenges for educators of students with disabilities.

Mismatched Educational Qualifications

A continuing challenge is that numerous educators need specialized qualifications or sufficient training for special education needs. Inadequately prepared teachers need help implementing effective methods, a situation worsened by changing SPED requirements and restricted opportunities for professional development (Farley et al., 2020). In the Philippines, teachers have identified insufficient targeted SPED training as a barrier to effectively addressing students' needs (Benito & Pangilinan, 2018). Without specialized qualifications, special education teachers may encounter increased stress and reduced effectiveness in managing a range of disabilities in their classrooms (Arcidiacono & Baucal, 2020). The special education teachers did not have special education programs for their degrees. Therefore, they do not possess the needed knowledge and experience to handle children with disabilities. Experience, training, and knowledge are deemed vital. These accomplishments are viewed as challenges in the books of SPED educators. Many educators who instruct diverse students exhibit deficiencies in this area.

Integration of Teaching Pedagogy

Effective integration of specialized SPED pedagogies into the curriculum necessitates that educators have both theoretical understanding and practical competencies. Special education practitioners often face difficulties as their kinds of direct instruction and individualized teaching styles depend on certain face-to-face classroom practices (Kaden, 2020). The varied needs of SPED students necessitate adaptive strategies that general education teachers may only be prepared to employ with targeted training and pedagogical resources (Gaastra et al., 2016). Teachers implementing inclusive pedagogies, including personalized learning and scaffolded instruction, report improved outcomes; however, insufficient support structures frequently hinder these efforts. Educators face challenges in implementing strategies due to the diverse student disabilities in a classroom. The teaching methods applicable to these students were distinctive and posed challenges for educators, as their effectiveness remained uncertain. Educators need to deliver the curriculum in a way that addresses students' needs.

Home Visitation

Home visits permit SPED teachers to have an immediate way of understanding students' home circumstances, which may affect learning results. Practical limitations involving time, resources, and teacher workload have made home visitation challenging. In cases involving little parental involvement, home visits are essential in creating trust and increasing understanding (Stoner et al., 2020). This intensive approach may be achievable only for some special education teachers, especially in rural or underfunded areas where home environments differ significantly from the school setting.

Time Management

Excellent special education teaching is time-consuming due to thorough preparation, careful documentation, and individualized attention to each student's progress. Special education teachers face more significant challenges in accomplishing the curriculum requirements by meeting the differential needs of the students, which raises workloads and time constraints (Dano & Arfasa, 2020). Davis (2021) indicates that balancing instructional time with administrative demands complicates time management for SPED educators, frequently leading to burnout. Special education educators dedicated increased time to their work. Educators typically need more time for personal enjoyment or self-care.

3.2 Challenges of SPED Teachers in New Normal Education

Teachers of children with unique needs faced tremendous circumstances during the new normal of education. Below are the challenges of special education educators during this new normal.

Lack of Parental Support

Special education teachers encounter a notable challenge, insufficient parental support, which has intensified in remote and blended learning contexts. Recent studies indicate that parental engagement is essential for student success; however, many parents need limited resources or time to address their children's educational needs at home. Such support often thwarts teachers' plans since parents can be reluctant to join planned learning activities or behavioral management strategies, essential for maintaining long-term schooling within special education (Mendoza, 2023). Some obvious gaps have come to light since the pandemic, and such interventions as the difficulty of reaching parents, not to mention rural parents with less exposure to resources or the internet, were highlighted by teachers (Lambert & Fitzpatrick, 2022).

A lighter role of parents in supporting education-related activities can make students' learning challenges more explosive for SPED students. The absence of adequate parental support lowers students' attention and engagement levels in an online or distance setting and diminishes the hurdles to quality learning. Teachers have successfully implemented individualized activities that foster enhanced student autonomy and academic resilience. Lack of regular involvement by parents may work to limit the effects of these adjustments. Improving parenting support by providing accessible training and resources is one of the ways to help optimize educational outcomes for SPED students (Lambert & Fitzpatrick, 2022; Mendoza, 2023).

Lack of Technological Expertise

SPED teachers require more technological know-how than they possess, negatively impacting lesson delivery in home or hybrid settings. Many special education teachers need assistance in tailoring their instructional practices to online learning environments. They report a lack of preparation in teaching digital tools, alongside a significant absence of technical support. The issue quickly arose at the onset of the shift to remote learning when teachers complained of struggling to handle virtual classrooms and individualized support to students with disabilities (Gulya & Fehervari, 2020). Educators did not receive enough support from the school. They lack the training they need to feel qualified to teach (Ajoc, 2019). This lack of training meant that teachers did not know how to use the assistive technologies effectively to support learning.

The speed at which digital learning environments have been rolled out has created a very steep learning curve and often demands SPED teachers spend much more time becoming familiar with the needed tools and applications. Teachers were overwhelmed, unprepared, frustrated, and ineffective in providing differentiated instruction. There is a need to enhance the technological training and support structures for SPED teachers in filling this gap and ensuring the efficient introduction of technology into the special education curriculum (Mendoza, 2023; AIDE Interdisciplinary Research Journal, 2023).

Overloaded Teaching Tasks

Overloaded teaching responsibilities are a significant challenge for special education teachers, mainly regarding complications of remote learning. Special education teachers usually have extra burdens like IEP management, communicating with parents, and adjusting to the needs of their different students, thereby increasing their workload (Mendoza et al., 2023). This situation causes burnout among teachers because special education teachers

require more time than regular teachers to find and distinguish the needs of every learner in online or blended learning environments.

The increased workload often has administrative aspects, such as recordkeeping and constant communication with the parents, which are significant in special education. The reported activities signify that these duties increased during the pandemic, consuming the teacher's time and energy. Lack of support and resources from the institution can further impact instruction quality and lower teacher well-being. Targeted administrative support and pragmatic scheduling can offset the burden, reduce stress, and improve the quality of instruction within special education settings (Lambert & Fitzpatrick, 2022; Mendoza et al., 2023).

Assessment of Learning

Assessment of students' learning in special education differs from a regular assessment of remote education. Many assessment tools developed for a face-to-face classroom environment may need to fully depict the student's competencies or progress in that virtual space. Recent research illustrates that classroom assessments are challenging for teachers, mainly because of the constraints in remote observation and the unavailability of adaptive assessments intended to better respond to the intricacies of special education learning needs (Gulya & Fehervari, 2020). The absence of hands-on assessments exacerbates this issue, as they are essential in special education for observing motor skills and other physical responses.

In response, certain educators have modified their approaches by creating alternative assessments, including project-based tasks, to assess students' comprehension. This approach necessitates extra time and effort from teachers already handling significant workloads. Providing SPED teachers with practical, adaptive assessment tools and training in virtual evaluation methods may address this challenge, enabling teachers to monitor and support their students' development remotely (Mendoza, 2023; Lambert & Fitzpatrick, 2022).

Integration of Teaching Pedagogy in Distance Learning

Special education teachers need support to adapt their unique teaching methods to distance learning settings. Hands-on activities, physical manipulatives, and in vivo behavioral interventions are not possible in digital settings; thus, they cannot be as effective as those used with children with special needs in face-to-face settings. Studies show that such pedagogies are necessary to maintain interest and students' potential to learn in SPED and are difficult to replicate in digital environments (Gulya & Fehervari, 2020). They are forced to shift to virtual learning platforms that impose further challenges on special education teachers, who must develop strategies to ensure learning accessibility for students (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

Moreover, some instructors believe that the lack of engaging in real-time feedback during online classes hinders their ability to tailor classroom instruction to student needs. Virtual constraints in learning influence the workability of appropriate special education pedagogies. Educators must be creative with technological alternatives that can serve only partially in place of in-class experiences. More technology research that supports SPED-specific pedagogies in online environments is needed for better learning outcomes (AIDE Interdisciplinary Research Journal, 2023).

Remote Intervention of a Child's Disability

Remote intervention in special education is very challenging, particularly given the behavioral and developmental needs of each child with a disability. There are specific disabilities that require direct support and tailored interventions that are pretty challenging to deliver through virtual means, such as autism, sensory processing disorder, and others, according to the findings of special education teachers. While preventing in-classroom intervention might delay the delivery of direct support to students with disabilities as much as possible, this will impact their general development and outcomes at educational institutions (Gulya & Fehervari, 2020; Lambert & Fitzpatrick, 2022).

Teachers must adapt by creating tailored remote interventions; however, more resources and training may help the effectiveness of these adaptations. A structured environment is needed to ensure the execution of these interventions, as students may encounter behavioral challenges that are challenging to manage from a distance. Enhancing resources and support for remote intervention may assist educators in addressing these challenges

more efficiently, ensuring that special education students obtain essential guidance despite the transition to online learning (Mendoza, 2023).

3.3 Coping Mechanisms of SPED Teachers Before and During the New Normal

Even pre-pandemic, the SPED educators applied some ways to cope with the hindrances in teaching their pupils. This part presents the coping ways that were also used as they faced the new normal of education.

Parent-Teacher Partnership

Special education teachers face unique challenges in building functional relationships with parents that would still be vital in numerous ways to support students with special needs. New research suggests that two-way, collaborative communication is crucial in light of the obstacles of mistrust and potential conflict that are likely to surface, particularly in more diverse and high-needs settings (Madsen & Madsen, 2022). Most effective partnerships involve regular updates and collaborative decision-making to further mutual respect, thus enhancing a cohesive approach to meeting the needs of special education students. Evidence shows that effective partnerships benefit educational outcomes by synchronizing family and school strategies with individual student goals, easing teacher stress, and promoting consistency between home and school environments (Abellana et al., 2023). Many SPED teachers report working under limitations due to logistical and relational challenges that have been going on and are described as constant (Madsen & Madsen, 2022).

The pandemic drastically shifted the parent-teacher dynamics to a standard distant or modular learning approach. This medium increases frustration levels among teachers because many instances of understanding and addressing the needs of students require face-to-face interaction. Instructors used online updates, messaging, and video calls to keep in touch with parents; sometimes, it fell short of face-to-face contact, decreasing participation (Madsen & Madsen, 2022). Evidence demonstrates that communication-based collaborations are more open and transparent, preparing parents and teachers to effectively deal with students' emotional and educational requirements even during crises like distance learning (Abellana et al., 2023).

Self-Motivation

Self-motivation is the intrinsic drive that compels individuals to take initiative and pursue goals without external prompts. It plays a crucial role in personal and professional development, influencing one's ability to overcome challenges and focus on objectives. Self-motivation is the most significant coping mechanism for SPED teachers, who are often forced to rely on personal endurance in dealing with the inherent problems of their jobs. The massive use of adaptive and emotion-focused coping strategies among teachers speaks volumes about their proactive attitude toward challenges. According to Lynch (2020), educators usually adopt proactive planning and psychological self-care strategies to maintain their mental health and energy. Teachers who foresee possible challenges will usually have lower levels of stress because they will prepare themselves for various classroom and behavioral circumstances, especially when the availability of resources for support is limited (Abellana et al., 2023). Self-motivation is often enhanced through setting minimal yet achievable, small goals aligned to student progress so that teachers can recognize incremental achievement.

Teachers who practice mindfulness or reflective activities when working with emotionally challenging situations have lower stress levels. Peer support and sharing, which are also part of sharing work experiences and receiving help from fellow teachers, help teachers self-motivate because they create an atmosphere of belongingness and acceptance (Lynch, 2020). Teachers are also made to have an upper hand when time is set aside for professional development. The teachers benefit from their increased confidence and commitment towards students (Abellana et al., 2023).

Professional Development

Continued professional development keeps the skills of special education teachers innovating on strategies to meet the diversified needs of their students. Such access to professional development implies a better understanding of pedagogy and classroom management for the teacher, which is essential in managing a classroom effectively for exceptional children (Voogt et al., 2016). The curriculum and team-based professional development encourage the teachers to use new strategies and enhance the participation of the students. Recent studies conclude that cooperative professional development activities, especially those about classroom practice,

can make it possible for special education teachers to enhance their competencies and adjust their practices according to the needs of specific students (Abellana et al., 2023).

Professional development in digital tools, emotional regulation, and special education policy was of major utility during the pandemic since special education teachers had to adjust their practice to accommodate the distant learning environment (Madsen & Madsen, 2022). Most teachers report having limited opportunities for professional development due to a lack of time or inadequate institutional support, and there is a dire need for flexible, accessible professional development resources to sustain quality special education teaching practices (Voogt et al., 2016).

Integration of Effective Strategies

Infusing students with the best strategies of differentiated instruction and co-teaching models allows special education instructors to meet diverse learning needs appropriately. It has been found that special education teachers who implement collaborative planning, experiential learning, and individualized strategies will get enhanced student outcomes and job satisfaction (Peterson, 2021). Co-teaching encourages a collaborative approach to teaching wherein educators can abide by the diverse learning needs of each student within an inclusive setting by utilizing the diversified strengths of every teacher. Differentiated instruction allows teachers to modify content, processes, and learners' outcomes to match a wide range of learning speeds and styles, which is important in special education due to students' differences in needs (Abellana et al., 2023).

Such strategies require extensive effort since adjusting teaching methods to suit students' needs takes time. It has been established that those who teach with these approaches in active ways are more resilient and cope better because they feel empowered by having a better understanding of how to deal with the demands of their work (Peterson, 2021). This capability to change pedagogies enhances emotional resiliency so that SPED teachers can enjoy a positive outlook while enhancing student interest (Madsen & Madsen, 2022).

4.0 Conclusion

This study highlights special education (SPED) teachers' challenges before and during the new standard education paradigm, emphasizing systemic, pedagogical, and logistical obstacles that affect their capacity to provide quality education to students with distinct needs. Before the pandemic, special education educators faced significant challenges, including insufficient parental support, discrepancies in educational qualifications, integration of teaching methodologies, burdens associated with home visitations, and difficulties in time management. The challenges were fundamentally linked to systemic issues, including restricted training opportunities and insufficient institutional support. Teachers exhibited significant adaptability by establishing parent-teacher partnerships, engaging in self-motivation, pursuing professional development, and implementing effective teaching strategies.

The pandemic accelerated the transition to new normal education, exacerbating existing challenges such as technological disparities, increased teaching workloads, limitations in learning assessments, and difficulties in providing direct interventions for students with disabilities. The constraints intensified pre-existing challenges, as numerous educators were insufficiently equipped with the requisite training, resources, and support systems to adapt to remote or blended learning contexts effectively. In light of these challenges, SPED teachers have maintained effective coping strategies, including improved communication with parents, implementing innovative teaching methods, and pursuing professional development to navigate the changing educational environment. This study's findings highlight the resilience and commitment of SPED teachers in the face of adversity. They indicate a significant requirement for systemic reforms to address ongoing deficiencies in training, support, and resource allocation to facilitate the comprehensive development of students with special needs.

Robust communication between parents and educators is essential in tackling the challenges encountered by special education teachers. Educational institutions should implement efforts that engage parents more actively in their child's learning process, particularly highlighting the significance of parental involvement in special education. Workshops and accessible resources might enable parents to effectively assist their children at home, ensuring a unified approach to learning. Simultaneously, the enhancement of educator training and continuous professional development is vital. Training programs should encompass special education pedagogy, behavior

management, and instructional strategies for inclusion. Technological literacy modules should be integrated into curricula to equip instructors for digital and hybrid classrooms. Professional development must be adaptable, accessible, and attuned to the distinct requirements of SPED educators.

Equally significant is the allocation of sufficient resources and institutional backing. Educational institutions must supply assistive technologies, instructional resources, and adaptive learning systems that enable individualized education. Resources must be designated for the recruitment of special education experts and the reduction of teacher workload. Furthermore, creating assessment tools suitable for remote and hybrid learning contexts is essential for accurately measuring student progress. Educating teachers on virtual assessment techniques can enhance their ability to evaluate student skills and development more efficiently.

Collaborative teaching styles can significantly enhance the educational environment. Co-teaching practices that involve collaboration between general and special education teachers may more effectively address the varied needs of pupils. Peer mentorship programs should be promoted to facilitate information exchange and provide emotional support. This necessitates institutions to establish and improve comprehensive mental health support systems, incorporating counseling and mindfulness programs to cultivate self-motivation and resilience among SPED educators. A recognition and awards system will enhance morale and foster a supportive workplace atmosphere.

5.0 Contributions of the Author

The researcher ensures the study's completeness and integrity. The sole author significantly went through editing, writing, supervision, data analysis, and encoding. This involved improving the paper, overseeing the study's progress, conducting thorough data analysis, and ensuring accurate encoding for reporting purposes. She even focused on fieldwork and adherence to research ethics, managing data collection, transcribing the collected material, and following ethical guidelines throughout the study.

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