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Teacher Self-Efficacy and Stress in Special Education: Evidence from Rural Schools in CAR, Philippines

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Abstract. The psychological well-being of special education teachers is crucial to the successful implementation of inclusive education; however, their experiences with stress and perceived self-efficacy remain underexamined in rural contexts. This study examined the levels of self-efficacy and stress among special needs education teachers in selected rural schools in the Cordillera Administrative Region, Philippines, and determined the nature of their relationship. Employing a descriptive-correlational research design, the study involved special needs education teachers. Standardized instruments – the Teacher's Self-Efficacy Scale and the Wilson Stress Profile for Teachers – were adapted and validated to assess seven dimensions of self-efficacy and nine dimensions of stress. Descriptive statistics revealed that participants had a high level of self-efficacy, most notably in disciplinary management and parental engagement, and a high level of stress, with time management, intrapersonal conflict, and physical symptoms being the most prominent stressors. An analysis of the relationship showed no significant relationship between self-efficacy and stress. These findings underscore the need for holistic, system-based interventions, including policy-driven mental health initiatives, inclusive and context-responsive professional development programs, and sustained research efforts that investigate mediating factors in rural special education contexts. The study offers empirical evidence for stakeholders and policymakers to develop targeted reforms that enhance teacher retention, well-being, and instructional quality within marginalized educational environments.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Self-efficacy; Special education; Teacher stress; Teacher well-being.

1.0 Introduction

The pivotal role of special needs education (SPED) teachers in realizing the global agenda of inclusive education, particularly within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, has underscored the importance of their psychological and professional well-being. In this context, two constructs – self-efficacy and stress – emerge as critical determinants of SPED teachers' performance and resilience.

Self-efficacy, rooted in Bandura's social cognitive theory, refers to the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations (Chan et al., 2020). For SPED teachers, a high level of self-efficacy is crucial to navigating the complex demands of individualized instruction, behavioral management, and emotional labor (Holzberger & Prestele, 2021a; Lam et al., 2022a). Empirical research confirms that teacher self-efficacy has a significant impact on classroom practices, instructional adaptability, and student outcomes (Fackler et al., 2020a; Lazarides et al., 2020a). Moreover, teachers with high self-efficacy tend to exhibit

greater motivation and commitment (Ventura et al., 2015a; Rahmadani & Kurniawati, 2021a), whereas those with low self-efficacy may experience increased frustration and limited instructional flexibility (Lam et al., 2022b).

Stress, conversely, remains a persistent challenge in the teaching profession, exacerbated in the context of special education where complex learner needs, increased workload, and emotional labor are prevalent (Cancio et al., 2018a; Guo, 2024a). Various stressors – ranging from administrative demands and a lack of support to behavioral challenges – are cited as detrimental to teacher well-being (Jafree et al., 2022a; Herman et al., 2023a). Research further suggests that stress negatively affects teachers' job satisfaction, health, and instructional effectiveness (Boon et al., 2021a).

Several studies have explored the interplay between teacher self-efficacy and stress. Findings reveal a consistent negative correlation, with higher self-efficacy acting as a protective factor against perceived stress (Putwain & von der Embse, 2019; Weißenfels et al., 2021a). Gonzalez et al. (2017) and Yulianti et al. (2018) emphasized that while self-efficacy mitigates occupational stress, the contextual variables, such as school support and workload, moderate this relationship.

Despite the breadth of international research, two significant research gaps remain. First, while studies have established links between self-efficacy and stress in general and mainstream education contexts, there is a notable scarcity of empirical studies focusing specifically on SPED teachers in rural or under-resourced settings, such as the selected rural schools in the Cordillera Administrative Region, Philippines. Second, the local literature on the psychological constructs of SPED teachers remains underdeveloped, with most Philippine-based studies focusing on general education teachers or merely touching upon stress and self-efficacy without exploring their interrelationship in depth. Additionally, there is limited research that presents stress and self-efficacy in tandem with demographic and organizational influences in inclusive education contexts.

These identified gaps underscore the need for context-specific investigation that can generate empirical data from localized perspectives. Doing so could help capture the nuanced experiences of Filipino SPED teachers, particularly those in rural environments, and contribute toward informed policymaking, mental health interventions, and inclusive education reforms.

Thus, this study aimed to assess the level of self-efficacy and stress of SPED teachers and examine the relationship between self-efficacy and stress. This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the limited body of empirical literature on the psychosocial well-being of SPED teachers in the Philippines, particularly in geographically disadvantaged and rural regions. It responds directly to calls for more localized and inclusive education research through generating context-specific insights. Second, the findings will aid educational administrators and policymakers in identifying critical areas for support, such as capacity-building, mentoring, and resource allocation, to strengthen SPED teachers' efficacy while mitigating occupational stress. Third, the study highlights the psychological aspects of inclusive education implementation, offering empirical evidence that can inform the development of teacher well-being programs, stress management initiatives, and professional development frameworks. Finally, the research has implications for broader educational reforms, as improving SPED teacher efficacy and reducing stress levels are likely to enhance instructional quality, teacher retention, and student outcomes in special education settings.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design, which is appropriate for the study's objectives, as it seeks to describe the levels of self-efficacy and stress among special needs education (SPED) teachers and determine the statistical relationship between these two variables. A descriptive-correlational design is a non-experimental approach that allows the researcher to systematically and objectively quantify attributes and explore the potential associations between them without manipulating the study environment (Creswell, 2012).

2.2 Research Participants

The study was conducted in selected rural schools in the Cordillera Administrative Region, Philippines. The target population consisted of all public school teachers who handled students with special educational needs within the selected rural schools. The total population of SPED teachers in these schools was 28, making it appropriate to employ total population sampling, a non-probability sampling technique used when the population is small and

shares specific characteristics relevant to the study. This approach ensures that all eligible individuals are allowed to participate and that the data represents the entire accessible population of interest.

Of the 28 identified SPED teachers, 23 voluntarily participated and completed the survey questionnaires, yielding an actual sample size of 23. The remaining five teachers either declined participation or failed to return the survey instruments despite initial consent.

Inclusion criteria specified that participants must 1) be actively teaching learners with special needs education for at least 10 consecutive months, and 2) have at least two students with special needs education in their classes, regardless of whether they were deployed in a special class, inclusive setting, or regular classroom. Teachers are qualified regardless of their academic specialization, licensure, or tenure status, as long as they have functional responsibility for educating learners with special needs.

2.3 Research Instrument

The Teacher's Self-Efficacy Scale, adapted from Bandura's work, was used to measure seven subdimensions of self-efficacy. At the same time, the Wilson Stress Profile for Teachers was employed to assess nine domains of teacher stress. To ensure contextual relevance and ease of administration, the original scoring structure of the Wilson Stress Profile was modified into a standardized 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree). This adjustment promoted consistency across both instruments, reduced respondent confusion, and facilitated meaningful comparative analysis of mean scores. Furthermore, to interpret the resulting mean scores, a benchmark rubric was applied wherein values ranging from 1.00 to 1.79 were interpreted as Very Low, 1.80 to 2.59 as Low, 2.60 to 3.39 as High, and 3.40 to 4.00 as Very High. This rubric enhanced the qualitative interpretation of self-reported stress levels and efficacy. Both instruments were pilot-tested, yielding reliability coefficients of 0.924 for self-efficacy and 0.908 for stress, indicating their appropriateness for use in the study's specific rural educational context.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

The data collection process was carried out in a single phase. This involved administering standardized survey instruments to quantify the levels of self-efficacy and stress among SPED teachers. Before distribution, formal permission was obtained from the Superintendent of Schools. Upon approval, the researcher coordinated with school principals to facilitate access to the identified SPED teachers in selected rural schools. Each eligible teacher was provided with a research packet containing: 1) an informed consent form; the adapted and validated Teacher's Self-Efficacy Scale; and 3) the Wilson Stress Profile for Teachers. The instruments were administered in person, with respondents given sufficient time to complete them independently. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

Quantitative data were encoded, organized, and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics – specifically mean and standard deviation – were computed to determine the overall and dimensional levels of self-efficacy and stress among the respondents. To examine the relationship between self-efficacy and stress, Spearman's Rho correlation was employed. This statistical method was appropriate given the scale-level measurement of the variables and the goal of identifying the strength and direction of association. This also takes into account the number of respondents.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The ethical conduct of this study was guided by established research ethics protocols to ensure the protection of all respondents. Before data collection, formal approval was obtained from the appropriate school division authority. All prospective respondents were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights as respondents through a written informed consent form. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were assured that they could decline or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequence. To uphold data confidentiality, no personally identifiable information was collected in the survey instruments. Each participant's responses were anonymized using numerical codes during data entry and analysis. Completed survey forms were securely stored in a locked cabinet, and electronic files were password-protected, accessible only to the primary researcher.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Level of Self-Efficacy of the Special Needs Education Teachers

Table 1 below presents the level of self-efficacy among special needs education teachers in various dimensions, including efficacy in influencing decision-making, efficacy in influencing school resources, instructional self-efficacy, disciplinary self-efficacy, enlisting parental involvement, enlisting community involvement, and creating a favorable school climate. Overall, the level of self-efficacy among special needs education teachers is High (M = 2.86, SD = 0.16), indicating that they perceive themselves as capable of performing the various roles expected of a teacher in a special needs education setting. This high level of self-efficacy suggests a strong belief in their ability to make sound decisions, manage school resources, deliver quality instruction, discipline students, involve parents and the community, and create a favorable school climate. Having a high self-efficacy among teachers provide lots of benefits as mentioned in various studies, such as willingness to try out novel teaching methods (Demirdag, 2015), more likely to adopt instructional strategies (Chao et al., 2017) and feeling greater dedication and less burnout (Ventura et al, 2015b). They firmly believe that they could produce a positive impact on student outcomes, instructional quality, and school environment.

Table 1. *Level of Self-Efficacy of the Respondents*

Dimensions	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Efficacy to Influence Decision Making	2.81	0.51	High
Efficacy to Influence School Resources	2.87	0.76	High
Instructional Self-Efficacy	2.94	0.70	High
Disciplinary Efficacy	3.01	0.69	High
Enlist Parental Involvement	3.12	0.68	High
Enlist Community Involvement	2.35	0.71	Low
Create a Positive School Climate	2.89	0.68	High
Total	**2.86**	**0.16**	**High**

Upon closer examination, the highest level of self-efficacy was observed in enlisting parental involvement (M = 3.12, SD = 0.68). This implies that special needs education teachers have strong confidence in their ability to work effectively with the parents of their students. This suggests that special needs education teachers may encourage parents to participate in their children's academic endeavors. In the study by Bartolome et al. (2020), it was mentioned that teachers must understand that parental involvement has a positive impact on the teaching and learning process. This suggests that the cooperation and participation of parents in their child's academic endeavors at school could be an essential factor in ensuring their child's educational success. A study by Balaba and Rama (2015) found that teacher-parent relationships significantly influenced students' academic and social development in the Philippines. Similarly, in special needs education, family involvement has a positive impact on students' academic as well as socio-emotional development (Mokhtar et al., 2023). It is crucial for creating a conducive learning environment for all students (Muhammad et al., 2024). The high self-efficacy of special needs education teachers also supports the school-family-community framework of Epstein (2018), which pointed out that when teacher extends his or her services it would promote students' success, and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of parental involvement process, who asserted that parental responsiveness is affected by the teacher's belief in their ability to involve parents (Yamauchi et al., 2016).

In contrast, the lowest levels of self-efficacy were recorded in the dimension of enlisting community involvement (M = 2.35, SD = 0.17). This means that special needs education teachers have low confidence in their ability to encourage the external community to support school initiatives. This belief is likely rooted in the understanding that, generally, the community does not fully understand the situations of students with special needs in education. In fact, in the study, Muhire and Kiarie (2024) found that communities have limited knowledge and understanding in supporting children with disabilities, which led to insufficient community participation in inclusive education. In contrast to this finding, the majority of teachers view community engagement as a positive aspect of their professional development (Yang, 2024). Previous studies revealed that teachers generally have high self-efficacy in influencing community involvement, which is positively associated with professional learning (Zheng et al., 2020), shared norms and collective responsibility (Cai et al., 2022), and parental involvement (Maldia, 2024). As such, special education schools must conceptualize programs that connect and engage with community stakeholders. Providing training for special needs education teachers on partner-building and community mapping may boost this dimension of efficacy. The best practices for establishing and sustaining school community partnerships include involving stakeholders, assessing needs, having a shared vision, constant communication, and promoting collaboration and cooperation among partners (Tomajin, 2022).

Despite the lower ratings in community engagement, other dimensions were rated highly, such as creating a favorable school climate *(M* = 2.89, *SD* = 0.68), influencing school resources (*M* = 2.87, *SD* = 0.76), and decision-making (*M* = 2.81, *SD* = 0.51). These results suggest that while special needs education teachers experience challenges in terms of broader community engagement, involvement, and collaboration, they still feel capable in internal school functions and with parental relations. Although, previous studies revealed that special needs education teachers' challenges in community engagement include inadequate preparation for effective partnerships with families (Collier et al., 2015; Epstein, 2018), difficulties in fostering deep relationships in diverse and high poverty communities (Lampert, 2020), role confusion (Berry & Gravelle, 2018), and a lack of resources, while also highlighting the importance of experiential learning and collaborative approaches to overcome these barriers.

In summary, findings revealed that special needs education teachers generally exhibit high self-efficacy, especially in areas directly related to classroom instruction and parental engagement. These findings align with Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, which posits that mastery experiences, social persuasion, and environmental factors influence teachers' perceived capabilities. Previous studies revealed that teachers' self-efficacy is generally strongest in classroom management and instruction (Holzberger & Prestele, 2021b; Rahmadani & Kurniawati, 2021b; Lazarides et al., 2020b; Fackler et al., 2020b; Poulou et al., 2018), while there is no existing research that directly links the level of self-efficacy to community involvement and engagement of special needs education teachers.

3.2 Level of Stress of the Special Needs Education Teachers

Table 2 below presents the level of stress experienced by special needs education teachers in terms of student behavior, employee/administrator relationships, teacher-to-teacher relations, parent-to-teacher relationships, time management, interpersonal conflicts, physical symptoms of stress, psychological/emotional symptoms, and stress management.

Table 2. *Level of Stress of the Respondents*

Dimensions	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Student Behavior	2.40	0.68	Low
Employee/Administrator Relationships	1.72	0.79	Low
Teacher/Teacher Relations	1.85	0.84	Low
Parent/Teacher Relationships	1.97	0.97	Low
Time Management	2.63	0.93	High
Intrapersonal Conflicts	2.57	0.94	High
Physical Symptoms of Stress	2.50	0.92	High
Psychological/Emotional Symptoms	2.23	0.78	Low
Stress Management Techniques	2.25	0.85	Low
Total	**2.23**	**0.48**	**Low**

Overall, the level of stress among special needs education teachers is generally low (*M* = 2.23, *SD* = 0.48). This means that special needs education teachers may often feel that the stress they experience in their work is not severe and generally manageable. This finding suggests that special needs education teachers are likely to utilize positive and healthy coping mechanisms, and that they may have a supportive work environment. According to Herman et al. (2023b), teachers can effectively manage the demands of their job despite experiencing stress due to their high coping skills. It is further emphasized by Hamama et al. (2013) that self-control and organizational support may lower stress levels among special needs education teachers. This scenario may lead to enhanced psychological well-being among teachers, thereby resulting in better implementation of special needs education programs.

Upon closer examination, the highest level of stress was reported under the Time Management dimension (*M*=2.63, *SD*=0.93). This suggests that special needs education teachers believe their workload is too heavy to manage within the school, and they have limited time and resources to complete all these tasks. Time management challenges are common in all educational settings. Still, for special needs education teachers, the additional demands of individualized instruction, documentation, and collaboration can lead to overwhelming workloads and stress. These findings were also similar to a literature review conducted by Boon et al. (2021b), which revealed numerous studies showing a strong correlation between special education teachers' stress levels and workload parameters. They observed that among special education teachers, the primary source of stress was the workload.

Another dimension that yielded a high level of stress is the Intrapersonal Conflicts (*M*=2.57, *SD*=0.94), particularly due to self-imposed pressures such as the need to meet deadlines and negative self-evaluation. This suggests that the primary stressor for special needs education teachers is their self-expectation. Internal pressure contributes to their level of stress, which may hinder their ability to function well in their work. Having said this, previous research findings supported that special needs education teachers often face significant pressure, which can lead to burnout (Forostian & Sokolova, 2021) and other negative psychological states (Schmidt et al., 2024a; Guo, 2024b). Key stressors that contribute to the pressure that special needs education teachers place on themselves include lack of professional competency and training and administrative burden (Schmidt et al., 2024b; Antoniou et al., 2009), classroom management and student behavior (Kokkinos & Davazoglou, 2009), workload and organizational issues (Paquette & Rieg, 2016a), and role ambiguity and conflict (Sang et al., 2022). To mitigate emotional burnout and other psychological states, providing an avenue for support, training, and professional development for special needs education teachers may be beneficial (Jafree et al., 2022b; Matsushita & Yamamura, 2025a). Working with students with special educational needs can be emotionally demanding, leading to internal conflicts and anxieties. Recognizing and addressing these internal struggles through self-care practices and professional support is crucial for managing stress effectively.

Consequently, special needs education teachers report a high level of physical symptoms of stress (M = 2.50, SD = 0.92). Physical symptoms can serve as a warning sign of chronic stress impacting special needs education teachers' physical well-being. Recognizing and addressing these symptoms is crucial for maintaining health and preventing burnout. Previous studies revealed that the nature of the job of special needs education teachers could be more demanding and elicit physical and psychological symptoms of stress. These can manifest in various ways, such as general health problems (Uthami & Sunardi, 2024), bio-psychological burnout symptoms (Sujarwanto et al., 2024), and an impact on well-being (Jeon et al., 2021). If not appropriately addressed, this time- and work-related stress may lead to potential burnout and reduce instructional quality among special needs education teachers. Hence, the school or the Department of Education may consider streamlining administrative tasks and providing clerical support. Although there is already an order regarding this matter from the Department of Education, it has not been fully implemented due to a lack of personnel to oversee such administrative tasks. The school and the Department of Education may also provide a consistent and focused stress reduction program to prevent long-term health issues.

On the other hand, the Employee/Administrator Relationships (*M*=1.72), *SD*=0.79) was found to have the lowest level of stress (*M*=1.72, *SD*=0.79), followed by Teacher/Teacher Relations (*M*=1.85, *SD*=0.84), which denotes that there are healthy interpersonal relationships within the school of the special need education teachers. These results indicate a level of confidence and professional self-assurance among the special needs education teachers. This finding supports the study by Aldosiry (2020), which suggests that special needs education teachers would experience less stress, increased satisfaction, and greater commitment due to a higher level of administrative support. Likewise, Ay et al. (2023) emphasized that supportive administrators can help minimize stress among teachers and that they make them feel empowered in their roles. Consequently, colleagues' support and a collaborative environment may also be contributory factors in reducing stress among teachers (Matsushita & Yamamura, 2025b; Wolgast & Fischer, 2017). These findings suggest that healthy administrator-collegial relationships can promote teacher retention and morale, as well as a collaborative and positive school culture.

Another interesting finding is that while Stress Management Techniques had an overall low score (*M* = 2.25, *SD* = 0.85). It reflects that special needs education teachers, when confronted with stress they cope differently, and that their coping mechanisms are normal and healthy. Previous studies have identified proactive coping mechanisms among special need education teachers, which include strategic planning, preventive coping, and emotional support seeking (Duli, 2015), adaptive strategies (Cancio et al., 2018b; Paquette & Rieg, 2016b), and stress management programs (Okeke et al., 2021). Considering that the special needs education teachers have a proactive coping mechanism, the school and the Department of Education may consider harnessing this practice by integrating stress management training into professional development consistently, comprehensively, and progressively. While there have been initiatives by the school and the Department of Education, a consistent and well-structured wellness program among special needs education teachers may be developed.

Overall, the special needs education teachers have a low level of stress with elevated stress in specific dimensions such as time management, intrapersonal conflict, and physical symptoms. This indicates that while external

support systems may be functional well, there is a significant need for personal and structural support in time allocation and emotional well-being.

3.3 Relationship between Self-Efficacy and Stress of the Respondents

Table 3 below presents the Spearman's rho correlation analysis, which examines the relationships between self-efficacy and stress among the respondents. The results indicate that self-efficacy has no significant relationship with job stress (r = -0.096, p = 0.662). This finding suggests that the respondents' level of self-efficacy does not have a substantial influence on their perceived stress related to their work. This implies that individuals with higher self-efficacy do not necessarily experience lower or higher levels of stress. The absence of a significant relationship challenges the common assumption that enhancing teachers' confidence in their professional abilities would automatically buffer them against workplace stress.

Table 3. *Spearman's rho Correlational Analysis of Self-Efficacy and Stress of the Respondents*

	Stress
Self-Efficacy	
Correlation Coefficient	-0.096
p-value	0.662

While there have been no significant relationships found between self-efficacy and stress, many studies have concluded that higher self-efficacy is associated with a lower level of stress (Lam et al., 2022c; Weißenfels, 2021b; Fernandez-Bernabe & Fabella, 2020; Love et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). They have found that teachers with stronger self-efficacy beliefs tend to experience lower levels of emotional exhaustion and stress. They also established that high self-efficacy serves as a psychological protective factor that mitigates stress responses in demanding work environments. The divergence in the current findings may be attributed to contextual factors, such as rural teaching conditions and limited resources, or the adaptive coping mechanisms developed by SPED teachers over time, which may neutralize the buffering role of self-efficacy. The findings further suggest that stress management among SPED teachers may not be sufficiently addressed by self-efficacy enhancement alone. Instead, it highlights the need for a more holistic and system-based approach, incorporating external support structures, administrative responsiveness, workload regulation, and access to mental health services. While developing professional competence and confidence remains essential, these must be complemented by tangible institutional reforms to effectively mitigate stress in the special education teaching context.

4.0 Conclusion

This study offers a significant empirical contribution to the understanding of psychological constructs among SPED teachers within a rural Philippine context. The findings revealed that SPED teachers in selected schools in the Cordillera Administrative Region, Philippines, demonstrate high levels of self-efficacy across various dimensions, including instructional delivery, disciplinary management, and parental involvement. Simultaneously, they experience low stress, particularly in areas related to time management, intrapersonal conflicts, and physical strain. However, contrary to prevailing literature, the statistical analysis indicated no significant relationship between self-efficacy and stress, suggesting that teachers' confidence in their abilities does not necessarily influence the extent to which they experience stress in their professional development.

This study's unique contributions lie in challenging the assumed linear relationship between self-efficacy and stress, particularly in underserved and resource-constrained educational settings. It highlights the possibility that contextual, organizational, or cultural factors may buffer or moderate this relationship, underscoring the complexity of teacher well-being in inclusive education. In terms of practice, the findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing stress among SPED teachers extend beyond self-efficacy development to address systemic issues, such as workload, institutional support, and mental health services. In the field of teacher education, the findings suggest the integration of practical stress-coping frameworks and resilience-building strategies in both pre-service and in-service training programs. This study underscores the complexity of teacher stress. It highlights the need for future research to explore mediating or moderating variables such as burnout, coping strategies, work-life balance, or organizational climate that may influence the relationship between self-efficacy and stress.

5.0 Contribution of Authors

Sole-authorship.

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7.0 Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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