

Challenges and Adaptations of Special Education Teachers in Talavera Central School: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

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Abstract. This study explored the lived experiences of special education teachers at Talavera Central School in addressing instructional challenges and implementing adaptations for learners with disabilities. Using a qualitative research design, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to investigate the professional and emotional dimensions of special education teaching. Participants reported significant challenges, including subject-specific teaching demands, behavioral management difficulties, limited instructional resources, and minimal support from parents and general education colleagues. Despite these obstacles, teachers demonstrated a high degree of instructional flexibility through individualized teaching approaches, differentiated instruction, and collaboration with stakeholders. They also engaged in continuous professional development and reflective practice, highlighting their resilience and commitment to inclusive education. Guided by an ecological systems perspective, the study revealed how multiple environmental systems—from classroom settings to institutional and societal structures—influence teacher practices and shape inclusive learning environments. The findings underscore the need for systemic reforms, including targeted teacher training, strengthened family engagement, and improved school infrastructure. These insights offer valuable implications for policymakers and educational leaders in designing sustainable and equitable support systems for special education professionals.

Keywords: special education, SPED teachers, instructional challenges, educational adaptations, inclusive education

1 Introduction

Special needs education refers to an educational system designed to support learners with physical, intellectual, emotional, or developmental disabilities. It aims to ensure that these students receive appropriate learning experiences, accommodations, and resources to promote their academic and personal development. This support often includes curriculum modifications, specialized instruction, and access to trained educators and facilities.

Globally, special education has gained increasing attention as countries work toward more inclusive systems. However, the implementation of inclusive education faces numerous challenges, including limited resources, a shortage of qualified teachers, and insufficient institutional support. In the United States, for instance, 86% of schools report difficulties in filling special education positions due to low interest in the profession, inadequate compensation, and high stress levels (Izak, 2024; Prescott, 2024).

The United Nations emphasizes in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) the need for inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Yet, children with disabilities often remain marginalized due to systemic barriers. Special education teachers, who play a pivotal role in supporting Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN), frequently encounter challenges such as inadequate training, insufficient teaching resources, and overwhelming workloads.

To address these challenges, educational adaptations are essential. The Positive Environments, Network of Trainers (PENT) defines adaptations as modifications within educational settings that enable students with disabilities to access learning materials, participate in activities, and achieve learning outcomes on par with their peers. These adaptations shape the teaching practices of SPED teachers and influence the overall learning environment.

In the Philippine context, a study by Kilag et al. (2024) underscores the importance of individualized instruction and highlights ongoing issues in teacher training, resource allocation, and collaboration among stakeholders. While some progress has been made, there remains a lack of localized research that specifically explores the day-to-day experiences of SPED teachers, particularly in public school settings.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the challenges and adaptations experienced by SPED teachers at Talavera Central School. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What challenges do SPED teachers face in delivering inclusive education? (2) What adaptations do they implement to overcome these challenges? The findings aim to inform policy decisions, raise awareness among stakeholders, and contribute to the improvement of inclusive education practices in the Philippines.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to describe the challenges and adaptations of SPED teachers in Talavera Central School. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of SPED teachers in Talavera Central School?
2. What are the challenges of SPED teachers in Talavera Central School?
3. What are the adaptations of SPED teachers in Talavera Central School?
4. How the SPED teachers in Talavera Central School describe their daily experiences in handling the Learners with disabilities?
5. What action plan may be proposed based on the results of the study?

2 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which was appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of Special Education (SPED) teachers at Talavera Central School. The qualitative method allowed the researchers to obtain rich, detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences, which could not be captured through quantitative means. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of the complex challenges and adaptive strategies employed by SPED teachers in their professional practice.

A transcendental phenomenological design was utilized to explore the essence of these experiences. Based on the philosophical underpinnings of Edmund Husserl (1913) and the methodological contributions of Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology emphasizes setting aside researcher biases (epoche) to focus solely on the participants' perspectives. This design was particularly suited to uncovering the core meanings behind the participants' shared experiences and to understanding the subjective realities they encountered in the field of SPED.

3 Results

The study of seven SPED teachers at Talavera Central School identified 18 themes highlighting key qualities and challenges in special education teaching.

Key Themes:

1. **Empathy and Moral Commitment:** Teachers showed compassion, patience, respect, and sensitivity to diverse student needs, with experienced teachers demonstrating greater emotional resilience.
2. **Instructional Competence and Adaptability:** Effective teaching required flexibility, creativity, and tailored strategies, with experienced teachers relying on proven methods while newer teachers explored approaches.
3. **Passion and Dedication:** Teachers extended care beyond academics, emphasizing love, patience, and behavioral management, especially during challenges like the pandemic.
4. **Pedagogical Challenges:** Difficulties included teaching outside specializations (e.g., math) and managing diverse behaviors, especially in students with autism.
5. **Resource and Support Limitations:** Lack of assistive technology, insufficient tools, limited parental involvement, and systemic barriers hindered teaching effectiveness.
6. **Teacher Adjustment and Growth:** Novice teachers needed mentoring to adapt to complex SPED environments and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).
7. **Administrative Support:** Supportive administration improved access to resources, training, and reduced teacher stress.
8. **Communication and Parent Collaboration:** Positive parent-teacher relationships built on trust and proactive communication enhanced student success, though parental misunderstandings and limited engagement posed challenges.
9. **Instructional Adaptation and Technology:** Teachers personalized instruction, used low-tech and digital aids, and employed motor and communication development tools.
10. **Behavioral Management:** Individualized strategies balanced discipline with empathy, supported by structured routines and positive reinforcement.
11. **Professional Development:** Continuous learning through seminars, online resources, and social media helped teachers improve skills and stay updated.
12. **Tailored and Technological Support for Learning**
Teachers used both low-tech tools (abacuses, braille readers) and digital assistive technologies (audio software, laptops, iPads) to support learning despite limited resources.
13. **Motor and Communication Enhancement**
Special education teachers employed manipulatives and physical equipment to develop motor skills, while using visual aids and sign language progressively to improve communication.
14. **Personalized Behavioral Management Support**
Individualized behavior strategies combined clear communication, empathy, and positive reinforcement, balanced with relationship-building and structured classroom routines.

15. Adaptation Through Continuous Learning

Teachers used online resources and social media communities for self-directed learning to stay updated and improve teaching methods.

16. Formalized Professional Development and Skill Enhancement

Ongoing formal training, including specialized courses like sign language, was pursued for skill growth.

17. Responsive Classroom for Learners with Special Needs

Flexible lesson planning, well-prepared classrooms, and consistent positive behavior management fostered an engaging learning environment.

18. Behavioral Management and Communication with Stakeholders

Teachers managed unexpected behaviors through observation, rewards, and collaboration with colleagues and parent

4 Discussion

This study explored the daily experiences of SPED teachers at Talavera Central School in managing learners with disabilities. The findings revealed structured yet flexible instructional planning, deliberate classroom preparation, and consistent behavioral management as central to their practice.

The teachers' reliance on routine planning and clear rules aligns with prior research emphasizing structure's role in supporting learners with special needs (e.g., Barrett et al., 2015). Their descriptions underscore that classroom environment elements such as temperature, lighting, and cleanliness contribute to effective learning, corroborating findings that environmental factors can explain meaningful variance in student outcomes.

Behavioral management strategies identified in this study reflect established approaches in special education, such as positive reinforcement and consistent rule enforcement. The use of reward systems to encourage participation parallels the evidence supporting the Good Behavior Game (Jornevald et al.), which has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing disruptive behaviors in SEN students.

The teachers' proactive communication with stakeholders, including parents and other educators, highlights collaborative efforts critical for addressing behavioral challenges and supporting students' social development. This coordination echoes literature stressing the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement in special education.

While the study contributes valuable insights into SPED teachers' day-to-day realities, limitations include the reliance on self-reported experiences from a single school context, which may affect generalizability. Future research should consider longitudinal observations and incorporate learner perspectives to deepen understanding of effective classroom practices.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes the importance of structured planning, supportive environments, and consistent behavioral management in special education classrooms. These findings inform recommendations for teacher training programs to reinforce skills in adaptive planning, environmental optimization, and stakeholder communication, ultimately enhancing support for learners with disabilities.

5 Conclusions

This study revealed that SPED teachers at Talavera Central School exhibit strong empathy, dedication, and adaptability, enabling them to create inclusive and supportive learning environments. Despite their strengths, they face considerable challenges such as limited resources, insufficient administrative support, and low parental involvement, which hinder the quality of special education delivery. To overcome these obstacles, teachers employ personalized strategies, assistive technologies, and continuous professional development, demonstrating a proactive commitment to inclusive education. Their daily practices balance behavior management and individualized instruction while maintaining communication with stakeholders. These findings highlight the critical need for improved institutional support and collaboration to enhance educational outcomes for learners with disabilities. Future research should explore effective models of resource allocation, parental engagement, and systemic support to further empower SPED teachers and optimize special education programs.

Recommendations

1. **Enhance Teacher Training:** Provide ongoing specialized training in inclusive strategies, behavioral interventions, and differentiated instruction to equip teachers for diverse student needs.
2. **Increase Institutional Support:** Allocate adequate funding for resources, assistive technology, and implement workload policies that allow teachers time for planning and individualized instruction.
3. **Strengthen Parent-Teacher Collaboration:** Offer regular workshops for parents and maintain consistent communication to foster active involvement and support student learning at home and school.
4. **Promote Research and Policy:** Support data-driven research on SPED practices and advocate for policies ensuring equitable access to resources and inclusive education.

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