

The Complexities of Non-SPED Teaching Pupils with Special Needs

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Republic Act 11650, known as the Inclusive Education Act of 2022, mandates that no learner shall be denied admission on the basis of special needs. The legislation underscores the principle of inclusive education, ensuring that all pupils, irrespective of their challenges, are placed in age-appropriate general education classes within their local schools to receive high-quality instruction, targeted interventions, and comprehensive support (Haug, 2017; Francis et al., 2020). Central to this movement is the integration of learners with special needs alongside their peers without special needs, with general education serving as the primary placement option for all learners (Alquraini & Gut, 2012, as cited in Sahani & Patel, 2023).

Both special education (SPED) and general education teachers are pivotal to the success of inclusive education, collaboratively designing engaging learning experiences and adapting instructional strategies to meet diverse student needs (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). A persistent challenge, however, is the shortage of SPED teachers. In 2019, only 3,679 SPED

teachers were available to serve 360,879 learners with special needs, yielding an alarming teacher-pupil ratio of 1:98 (Bernardo, 2021).

Budgetary constraints and limited facilities for learners with special needs further exacerbate the challenges faced by schools. Consequently, general education teachers are often required to address the educational needs of these pupils despite lacking specialized training (Luna, 2022). While their preparation typically focuses on teaching regular pupils, these teachers are indispensable to the implementation of inclusive education, frequently acting as the linchpins in integrating learners with special needs into mainstream classrooms (Dalonos, 2013).

In light of these challenges, examining the coping mechanisms employed by general education teachers is crucial for managing occupational stress and effectively meeting the needs of all students. Coping strategies, particularly problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches, are central to navigating the demands of inclusive education (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, as cited in Biggs et al., 2017). Problem-focused coping involves actively addressing and modifying the sources of stress, whereas emotion-focused coping emphasizes managing the emotional responses elicited by these stressors.

Acknowledging the difficulties encountered by non-SPED teachers is especially important as they continue to fulfill mentally and physically demanding roles following the resumption of face-to-face instruction. Understanding their strategies not only informs support systems but also strengthens the overall implementation of inclusive practices in schools.

Navigating Inclusive Education: Roles, Challenges, and Coping Mechanisms

Inclusive education is founded on the principle that learners with special needs have competencies comparable to those of their peers without special needs. This principle affirms that every learner can actively participate both in the classroom and in the broader school community. Central to this philosophy is the legislative mandate that education be provided in the least restrictive environment, meaning that learners with special needs should be integrated as fully as possible with typically developing peers, with general education serving as the primary placement (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). Effective inclusive education recognizes, understands, and addresses differences across physical, cognitive, academic, social, and emotional domains. While some learners may occasionally require specialized services, such as speech or occupational therapy, the goal remains to ensure that all students feel welcomed, supported, and appropriately challenged.

Inclusive education benefits all students. Research spanning three decades shows that learners with special needs make measurable gains in reading, writing, mathematics, and social studies, as reflected in grades and standardized assessments. They also develop stronger communication and social skills, form more friendships, and demonstrate lower rates of absenteeism and behavioral referrals. These learners often report higher self-esteem, greater motivation, stronger teacher relationships, and increased school engagement. Importantly, students without special needs also benefit, gaining acceptance, tolerance, and awareness when educated alongside peers with special needs, particularly when the curriculum promotes inclusivity (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Kim et al., 2016; Szumski et

al., 2022).

To be successful, inclusive education requires learning environments and instructional models that actively engage all learners. Strong administrative support and collaborative relationships between general and special education teachers are essential. Special education teachers bring expertise in adapting pedagogy for diverse learners, but many general education teachers lack comprehensive knowledge of strategies for supporting students with special needs (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). Collaboration is critical for developing accessible curricula and instructional materials. Special education teachers often create supplementary resources, such as visual aids, manipulatives, or technology tools, and provide one-on-one instruction when necessary.

Early literacy instruction that combines meaningful reading experiences with foundational skill development is more effective than focusing on either in isolation (Mathes et al., 2005 in Denton, 2012; Salminen et al., 2021; Zhang, 2021). Many inclusive classrooms use co-teaching models, in which both teachers share responsibility throughout the day, while others employ a “push-in” approach, with special education teachers providing targeted instruction during specific periods. Regardless of the model, continuous collaboration is essential to monitor student progress and adapt instruction to individual needs.

Despite these strategies, the Philippines faces a critical shortage of special education teachers, placing a heavy burden on general education teachers. In 2019, only 3,679 SPED teachers served 360,879 learners with special needs, resulting in a staggering ratio of 1:98 (Bernardo, 2021).

Enrollment declined during the pandemic but is expected to rise with the resumption of face-to-face classes in 2022. Although the Department of Education offers SPED training to general educators, participation has been

limited and insufficient to meet demand. Budget constraints further threaten the operation of Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs), which are vital for providing learners with special needs better access to general education and community support.

In many cases, general education teachers are left to teach pupils with special needs despite lacking specialized training (Luna, 2022). They play a crucial role in inclusive education, integrating learners with special needs into mainstream classrooms. However, effective inclusion requires awareness, positive attitudes, and informed instructional practices (Dalonos, 2013). Byrd and Alexander (2020) recommend that general educators base decisions on accurate assessment data, cultivate empathy and understanding, and communicate openly with all stakeholders. Yet, general education teachers continue to face significant challenges in delivering optimal learning experiences.

Coping with these challenges involves intentional cognitive and behavioral strategies to manage stress. Common mechanisms include self-distraction, stress management, avoidance, seeking emotional or informational support, and behavioral adjustments. Coping can be classified as 'approach,' which directly addresses the stressor (e.g., planning or seeking support), or 'avoidant,' which seeks to evade the stressor (e.g., denial or withdrawal). Similarly, strategies are 'problem-focused,' targeting changes to the stressful situation, or 'emotion-focused,' aimed at managing emotional distress.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984, as cited in Biggs et al., 2017) describe coping as a dynamic effort to manage external and internal demands perceived as taxing. They identify two fundamental styles: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping is employed when individuals believe they can act to modify the stressor, such as solving a

problem or managing deadlines. Those who view challenges as opportunities and trust their abilities are more likely to adopt this approach. In the context of inclusive education, non-special education teachers may apply problem-focused coping by independently developing strategies to address the needs of learners with special needs.

Non-Sped Teachers Handling Pupils with Special Needs: A Case Study

In the province of Antique, only one SPED center provides specialized education services. Limited access to such services necessitates that many learners with special needs attend regular elementary schools. For instance, in the Sibalom South District of Sibalom, Antique, the scarcity of licensed SPED teachers places the primary responsibility for educating learners with special needs on general education teachers. These teachers are tasked with developing instructional materials and fostering inclusive classroom environments, often without specialized SPED qualifications. Consequently, the primary objective of this study was to investigate the challenges encountered by non-SPED teachers in addressing the needs of learners with special needs within this renewed classroom context.

Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to capture and explore the research questions in depth. The investigation was conducted in the Municipality of Sibalom, Province of Antique, a second-class municipality and one of the three interior towns in the province. Eight teachers from various schools in Sibalom South were purposively selected based on specific inclusion criteria: permanent

employment in Sibalom South, aged 25 to 45 years, not a Special Education (SPED) major, and currently teaching at least one learner with special needs. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned.

Data were collected using a researcher-designed interview guide informed by the study's problem statement. The guide comprised four sections: the first explored teachers' lived experiences, the second examined challenges encountered, the third investigated coping mechanisms employed, and the fourth sought proposed interventions to address these challenges. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, interpreted, and thematically categorized. Data analysis followed Colaizzi's method, and the findings were synthesized into a phenomenological description capturing the core structure of the phenomenon. To ensure validity, results were shared with participants to confirm alignment with their experiences.

Prior to data collection, permissions were obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent of Antique and the District Supervisor of Sibalom South. Participants received informed consent letters detailing the study's purpose and their role. Interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience and conducted virtually between December 2022 and January 2023. Throughout the research process, the researcher ensured adherence to ethical standards, including coordination with relevant authorities. Participants' anonymity was preserved through pseudonyms, and confidentiality was rigorously maintained in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Informed consent was obtained to ensure participants were fully aware of the study and their involvement.

Findings

Participants in this study were invited to share their reflections and daily experiences in teaching learners with special needs. They described

and compared the various learning and teaching situations they encounter while supporting these learners in their classrooms.

Teachers face a wide variety of special needs among their students.

The participants, as non-SPED teachers, reported working with learners who require varying levels and types of support. Judy and Sally observed that some learners are highly capable and benefit from additional challenges, whereas others with cognitive limitations require substantial assistance. Similarly, Len highlighted the diversity within the classroom, noting the presence of both high-achieving learners who thrive with enrichment and learners with unique educational needs who necessitate tailored support.

Supporting learners with special needs is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor, as they may exhibit both remarkable abilities and significant limitations. Some learners excel cognitively despite their challenges, while others face physical or cognitive constraints. Labrague (2018) identified common special education needs in Catbalogan City, including speech-hearing impairments, Down syndrome, autism, learning disabilities, ADHD, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, and visual impairment. Moreover, Gyasi et al. (2020) reported that teachers often possess limited knowledge of learners' special educational needs, placing non-SPED teachers at a disadvantage in addressing this diverse range of requirements.

Children with special needs also have distinct learning styles.

Participants emphasized that learners with special needs acquire knowledge differently from their typically developing peers, requiring individualized support and understanding. Beyond physical or behavioral differences, these learners exhibit unique approaches to learning due to diverse physical, cognitive, or developmental challenges. A common issue among them is a

limited attention span, particularly when topics fail to engage their interest. Consequently, it is essential for teachers to identify how each learner naturally absorbs knowledge and skills to optimize learning outcomes. Every learner, regardless of special needs, requires instructional strategies tailored to their individual strengths and challenges to foster academic success (Smith & Renzulli, 2020). Teachers must therefore develop the capacity to assess and recognize each learner's preferred learning style, enabling more effective acquisition of knowledge and skills.

As a result, teachers need to adjust their instructional approaches. Due to variations in learning styles and educational needs, non-SPED teachers must adapt their methods, even when they possess limited formal training in special education. Despite these challenges, learners can remain motivated and achieve academic success through strategies that enhance engagement and performance, supported by teachers' self-efficacy the belief in their ability to succeed despite constrained resources (Sarfraz et al., 2022). Nonetheless, targeted professional training for non-SPED teachers would further enhance their effectiveness in supporting learners with special needs.

Passion plays a crucial role in successfully handling pupils with special needs. Teaching learners with special needs is demanding, requiring patience, adaptability, and specialized instructional approaches. Participants acknowledged these challenges but emphasized that their continued commitment to teaching, despite obstacles, stems from a deep passion for the profession and genuine care for their learners. Although such challenges can be demotivating, finding purpose and meaning in their work enables teachers to persevere and excel. Passionate educators inspire learners and create engaging, enjoyable learning experiences. Serin (2017)

identified teacher passion as a key contributor to student achievement, highlighting that passionate teachers invest effort to design lessons that are interactive, hands-on, and stimulating.

When asked about the difficulties they face, participants shared a range of challenges in guiding learners with special needs.

Additional workload for individualized instructional materials. Non-SPED teachers reported experiencing exhaustion from creating supplementary materials tailored to the diverse learning styles of learners with special needs. Effective inclusive education requires that no child is left behind, with classrooms accommodating the distinct characteristics of all learners. However, developing specialized instructional materials poses a significant challenge for non-SPED teachers, who typically receive only basic training, unlike SPED teachers trained in these methodologies. Learners with special needs often require additional support to keep pace with their peers, including visual, verbal, auditory, or kinesthetic inputs to enhance comprehension and motivation. Ozkubat et al. (2022) emphasize that structured and enriched learning experiences are critical for improving information processing and sustaining motivation among children.

Difficulty in classroom management. Beyond the additional workload, teachers face challenges in managing the behaviors of learners with special needs, which can disrupt the learning environment for the entire class. These learners may exhibit inappropriate behaviors due to attention difficulties or limited behavior regulation at home, making classroom management particularly demanding. Such behaviors can lead to loss of control and hinder the smooth delivery of instruction. Karabiyik and Avcioglu (2021) emphasize the importance of equipping teachers with strategies to prevent and manage inappropriate behaviors effectively. The

inclusion of learners with special needs in general classrooms further highlights the limited experience and training that non-SPED teachers often have in implementing effective classroom management techniques.

Lack of proper education to teach SPED. The primary challenge faced by non-SPED teachers is insufficient training in special education pedagogies. Many participants reported feeling inadequately prepared to address the needs of learners with special needs. This lack of specialized knowledge constrains their ability to implement effective instructional strategies, a concern similarly highlighted by Allam and Martin (2022). Despite these limitations, teachers expressed a strong willingness to participate in professional training to enhance their capacity and demonstrated consistent efforts to perform effectively in inclusive classrooms.

To navigate these challenges, teachers employ various coping mechanisms that support their resilience and effectiveness in inclusive learning environments.

De-stressing through fun activities. When feeling overwhelmed, teachers engage in relaxing and enjoyable activities to clear their minds and alleviate stress. By recognizing stressors and seeking social or emotional support such as listening to music or socializing they adopt positive coping strategies. Clipa (2018) notes that such approaches enhance teacher performance, in contrast to negative strategies, such as avoidance. Developing self-awareness of stressors is essential for effective coping, as neglecting or evading challenges often exacerbates anxiety

Motivation through reinforcements. Teachers often apply behavioral theories learned during their education to motivate learners.

They recognize that reinforcements and consequences can influence behavior and learning motivation. However, managing challenging behaviors effectively requires more advanced knowledge to avoid inadvertently reinforcing negative actions. McKenna et al. (2016) recommend providing non-SPED teachers with training on function-based replacement behaviors to more effectively address student tantrums. While reducing or replacing negative behaviors can be challenging and sometimes ineffective, introducing and reinforcing appropriate alternative behaviors represents a more optimal strategy.

Thorough learning assessment to improve strategies. To compensate for gaps in their special education knowledge, teachers regularly assess learners' performance to identify areas requiring additional support. Frequent assessments enable teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of their instructional strategies, adjust learning goals, and tailor lessons to individual needs. Holmes (2018) found that frequent assessment enhances student engagement, retention, and overall learning outcomes. Moreover, these assessments highlight areas where teachers face challenges, informing targeted professional development and support. By addressing both learner needs and instructional difficulties, this approach reduces teacher anxiety and strengthens overall teaching performance.

Conclusion

The teachers' reflections highlight the complex and multifaceted realities of inclusive education. Successfully addressing the diverse needs of learners, continuously adapting instructional strategies to accommodate varying learning styles, and managing classroom disruptions effectively require not only professional expertise but also a profound commitment to

the teaching profession and genuine care for learners. These challenges are further compounded by limited resources, inconsistent levels of support, and the ongoing need to cultivate an environment in which every learner feels valued and included. Recognizing both the difficulties and the meaningful rewards experienced by teachers provides a comprehensive understanding of their lived realities, emphasizing not only the professional challenges they encounter but also the resilience, dedication, and perseverance that define educators committed to inclusive education.

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