

Lived Experiences of Special Education Teachers

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Abstract

This phenomenological research aimed to find out the lived experiences of the 7 teachers of an special education center handling special learners. Some of the participants described their experience as a roller coaster ride experience for it is a combination of positive and negative experiences. Other participants revealed that teaching special learners was a challenging yet very fulfilling and overwhelming experience for them after seeing their learners' progressed and succeed. Some participants revealed that they cannot communicate well to the special children because they do not have the knowledge to do the sign language. In terms of the challenges and issues encountered by the special educators in teaching special children, there were six dominant themes. Teachers worried that their learners are not properly diagnosed and medically assessed. The issue of denial and acceptance also emerged as a problem among the family members. Parents' knowledge on how to accommodate their children and catering their special needs was also a problem mentioned as well as the financial status of parents which affected their child's performance in school which became the main reason why their children are not diagnosed properly. In terms of the SPED curriculum, teachers revealed that the curriculum is not need-responsive because it is intended for the regular learners. The coping mechanisms adopted by teachers were encapsulated into five themes. One participant said that by equipping herself with professional knowledge using her personal resources really helped to understand, appreciate, and value more her special learners.

Keywords: *Special Education, Lived Experiences, Mainstream, Inclusive Education*

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Introduction

A teaching career has many challenges inside and outside the classroom. Special education teachers have an especially difficult job of not only teaching and managing their students, but also handling the paperwork and making sure accommodations and modifications are being met in the classroom. (A-State, 2016) Education is a fundamental human right. But the status of public special education (SPED) in the Philippines reveals a sad reality. It is faced with challenging issues which are basically systemic. It includes lack of funding irrelevant and unresponsive curriculum, mass exodus of SPED teachers, obsolete learning resources, lack of facilities, and the lack of support from school administrators. Even more heart-breaking is that the whole school community is not ready yet to accept children with autism and other special needs. Parents of typical children in the public-school question why students with disabilities are accepted and integrated with regular students. The usual 60:1 student-teacher ratio complicates an already complex situation. Parents of regular students worry that the inclusion of students with special needs will aggravate the inadequate number of teachers and classrooms. Parents of children with autism, on the other hand, worry about how much quality time can be given to the special needs of their children. (Koe, D., 2010) Education should enhance teachers who teach children with developmental disability and also create awareness in the society to accept children with special educational needs. However, children with developmental disability need extra attention in terms of curriculum adaptation, teaching methods, and availability of teaching and learning materials, assistive technology, assessment systems, as well as resources and funds for more assistance in adapting the school environment (Udoba, 2014).

This study was anchored on the theories of Inclusive Education by Helmer (2020) and Stress-Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1987) and redeveloped by Morgan (2012). Inclusive Education Theory focuses on students with different disabilities and impairments. It also focuses on educational policies, mechanisms and programs developed by the government or organizations which advocates the inclusivity of students with special needs in the mainstream education. Meanwhile, Stress-Coping Theory which explained that coping as a phenomenon that involves both cognitive and behavioral responses that individuals use in an attempt to manage internal and/or external stressors perceived to exceed their personal resources. This theory is grounded on the adjustment and modification of attitudes, thoughts, behavior, and emotions.

The two theories used in this study only validated that special education has become more popular in the Philippines and many schools are offering Special Education classes to cater their learning needs. However, on the part of the teachers who are teaching in the special education schools, they have encountered difficulties and stress in handling students with different special needs.

Methodology

This study utilized Phenomenological Research Design. Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Typically, interviews are conducted with a group of individuals who have first-hand knowledge of an event, situation or experience. The interview(s) attempts to answer two broad questions (Moustakas, 1994): What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situation have typically influenced your experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013)? Other forms of data such as documents, observations and art may also be used. The data is then read and reread and culled for like phrases and themes that are then grouped to form clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2013). Through this process the researcher may construct the universal meaning of the event, situation or experience and arrive at a more profound understanding of the phenomenon.

Colaizzi's method of data analysis was used in interpreting the qualitative research data gathered to identify meaningful information and organize it into themes or categories. The following steps represent the Colaizzi process for case study data analysis (cited in Sander, 2003, Speziale& Carpenter, 2007).

Each transcript was read and re-read to obtain a general sense of the whole content of the study. For each transcript, significant statements that pertain to the case under study were extracted. These statements were being recorded on a separate sheet noting their pages and line numbers.

Meaning was formulated from the significant statements. The formulated meanings were sort into categories and cluster of themes. The finding of the study was integrated into a description under a phenomenological research design. The fundamental structure of the phenomenological design was described.

Finally, validation of the findings was sought from the research participations to compare the researcher's descriptive results with their experiences.

Results

There were 7 themes emerged as lived experiences of teachers in teaching special learners in special education school. Some of the participants described their experience as a Roller Coaster Ride Experience for it is a combination of positive and negative experiences. Other participants revealed that teaching special learners was a Challenging yet very Fulfilling and Overwhelming experience for them after seeing their learners' progress and small success. One participant said that she felt happy when she successfully to be in Control of a Special Child who follows her instructions in her class. Some participants revealed that they Can't Communicate Well to the Special Children because they don't have the knowledge to do the sign language. Other participants appreciated and valued special learners because of their willingness to learn the topics introduced by the teachers. Seeing them learning inspite of their disabilities gives joy to the hearts of the special educators and they are happy that they have made a difference to the lives of a special child.

In terms of the challenges and issues encountered by the special educators in teaching special children, there were six dominant themes. Teachers worried that their learners are not properly diagnosed and medically assessed. The issue of denial and acceptance also emerged as a problem among the family members. Parent's knowledge on how to accommodate their children and catering their special needs was also a problem mentioned as well as the financial status of parents which affected their child's performance in school and which became the main reason why their children are not diagnosed properly. In terms of the SPED curriculum, teachers revealed that the curriculum is not need-responsive because the curriculum is intended for the regular learners. In terms of the facilities and materials, most of the participants were saying that there were no enough materials for them to use. If there are, those were to be modified in order to suit to the needs of the special learners they mentioned braille and more TV for each room for their HI and VI learners and in terms of the training and seminar on special education, all teachers said that trainings they attended were not disability-specific and were only conducted in a very short period of time. Short enough, that they can't grasp everything.

The coping mechanisms adopted by teachers were encapsulated into five themes. One participant said that by equipping herself with professional knowledge using her personal

resources really helped to understand, appreciate, and value more her special learners. Some of the participants revealed that attended trainings and seminars and even organized their own training for the parents and teachers to know the basics of sign language. Asking help to the NGOs and LGUs was only one of the coping mechanisms of the participant to ask for donation and help by introducing to them the SPED program of the school. Research and innovation were also conducted by the participants which aimed to help their learners with disability to catch the lessons and one participant said that teaching her learners with heart and compassion and she focuses on the ability rather than to the disability.

The researcher proposed a Capability Building Program designed for the teachers and Parents with the title: Upskilling and Empowering teachers and Parents on the Special Education and Inclusion Program. The proposed program has the following objectives: Learn Basic Filipino Sign Language, Be familiar with the important stipulation of Republic Act 11650 or the Inclusive Education Act, Understand the different Kinds of Disabilities and Difficulties, Identify the different Assistive Tools in every disability and difficulty, Identify the right accommodations for all disabilities and difficulties and Tapping the LGU and NGO for help and discussions.

Conclusion

Teaching in a special education school with special children being mainstreamed in a regular class requires great dedication, patience and love. Participants encountered both positive and negative experiences in the course of executing and performing their mandate to teach children with different disabilities which made them more appreciative and sensitive.

There is a serious problem in terms of the curriculum being used in the inclusion or mainstream education in the absence of the curriculum intended for them. Teachers likewise had a hard time to teach their learners due to the lack of facilities, materials, tools, and trainings which directly affect their teaching performance as well as the performance of their learners.

The values and character of being resilient, strong, positive, and resourceful were very evident among the 7 participants for they were able to come up with varied ways and means to remedy the problems they encountered while teaching special learners.

Problems in the implementation of the special education all over the country can be solved in there is a proper planning and cooperation among members of the society which includes the government, NGOs, teachers, learners and families.

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