

Within the classroom doors: Unveiling the lived experiences of general education teachers in handling learners with special educational needs

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Abstract

General education teachers are professionals equipped to teach learners in general education classrooms. However, due to the insufficient number of qualified special education teachers and the rising number of students with disabilities, these teachers are compelled to handle learners with special educational needs (LSENs). This study aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences of general education teachers in handling learners with special educational needs. The study employed qualitative method, particularly phenomenological design. The participants were purposively selected and interviewed through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was employed to identify themes in the data. The results showed that teachers collectively experienced challenges in instructional skills, negative attitudes toward work, uncooperative parents, behavioral issues, and the responsibilities of handling learners with special educational needs. An analysis of participants' responses revealed that teachers overcame challenges by self-upskilling through internet resources, demonstrating adaptability, utilizing support systems, and maintaining strong faith in God. The participants shared insights on the belief that teaching is a noble profession and the necessity for special education training and seminars for non-special education teachers. The results suggest that teachers lacking sufficient knowledge, skills, and experience in handling learners with special educational needs may face various challenges affecting their emotional stability, spiritual well-being, and physical condition. Accordingly, the Department of Education should strengthen its frameworks to safeguard teachers from learners with alarming behavior and offer additional support that empowers teachers' commitment to quality inclusive education.

Keywords: *general education teachers, special education, lived experiences*

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1. Introduction

Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSENs) are students who require additional instructional support and services tailored to their distinct needs (Campado et al., 2023). This assistance includes competent and equipped special education (SPED) teachers to educate and guide these learners (Balgos & Villarente, 2021). Special education teachers are qualified professionals who can aid learners with behavioral, growth-related, and physiological concerns; however, the number of these teachers is insufficient to support the growing population of learners who need special education services (Pruitt, 2023). Moreover, not all learning institutions are equipped with special education professionals; thus, some students with special needs are enrolled under the guidance of general education teachers (Byrd & Alexander, 2020).

In contrast with special education teachers, general education teachers are professionals who provide tailored instruction to learners at any grade level in mainstream classrooms (DeLussey, 2024). This indicates that general education teachers may encounter considerable challenges if they handle learners with special needs without adequate training since their teaching practices are geared toward handling learners in general classroom environments (Buttorff, 2023). These hurdles may involve a lack of awareness of inclusive instruction, behavioral challenges, parental involvement concerns, and the overwhelming responsibilities of managing LSENs (Balgos & Villarente, 2021; Ecoben, 2019; Lba, 2022).

Globally, there is a vast number of children living with disabilities, predominantly residing in developing nations (UNESCO, 2023). Several of these learners were enrolled in a regular institution, which implies that non-spced teachers supervised them (UNESCO, 2016). In the United States, numerous teachers serve almost millions of learners with disabilities, and a substantial number of them lack complete credentials or relevant qualifications for working in special education (Loeppky, 2021). As a result, these educators face challenges in providing effective instruction and addressing the behavioral issues of learners with special educational needs (Thompson, 2019; Johnston, 2022), which influences overall dynamics in the classroom and potentially compromises the learning process of all learners with disabilities (Clausen et al., 2022). Acknowledging this long-term problem in special education, the Salamanca Statement, adopted in 1994, highlighted the need for educational institutions to accommodate all learners, including those with special needs or disabilities. One of the core strategies outlined is the provision of teacher training to support learners with special education needs

effectively. This initiative is a key component of the framework for action, aimed at ensuring inclusive, equitable access to quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2016).

The Philippine government established legislation and policies to address concerns about inclusive education in the nation. Among these is the DepEd Order 21, Series of 2019, which indicates that general education teachers shall be considered vital implementers and proponents of inclusive education (DepEd, 2019). Thus, general education teachers in the country were compelled to handle LSENs despite having limited or no experience and knowledge about special education (Omoso & Villarente, 2024). In response to the concerns regarding SPED competencies, the Bureau of Learning Delivery-Student Inclusion Division of the Department of Education conducted a training program to provide general education classroom teachers with SPED knowledge and abilities to assist teachers in providing effective education to learners with disabilities (DepEd-BLD, 2019). Specifically, the program aims to enable general education teachers with SPED competencies concerning pedagogies, assessment, classroom accommodations, and instructional planning for students with special needs (Malipot, 2020). Despite the initiatives providing training and empowering general education teachers with special education skills, these teachers still encounter various challenges in handling learners with special educational needs (Balgos & Villarente, 2022).

Numerous studies have focused on the lived experiences of special education teachers and highlighted both the difficulties and accomplishments of teaching students with exceptional needs (Balading et al., 2023; Çetin & Çay, 2020; Eswine, 2021; Tuvida, 2023; Velasco, 2023). However, insufficient studies discuss the lived experiences of general education teachers, specifically in handling learners with special educational needs in public elementary schools (Auscavitch, 2022; Boitumelo et al., 2020). Moreover, a preliminary literature review presents that little documentation has been done on the Philippine setting. Taking this into account, there is a lack of understanding of the real-life perspectives of general education educators who handle learners with special educational needs, specifically in the local setting. Hence, it is imperative to conduct this study to examine and understand the lived experiences and coping strategies of general education teachers handling learners with special needs in public elementary schools and to provide insights to the academe and community. In addition, this study also aimed to shed light on the realities teachers face, strengthen

collaboration within the educational community, and ultimately promote better professional and social success for general education teachers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Lived Experiences of General Education Teachers

One challenge general education teachers face is their instructional competence when working with learners with disabilities due to insufficient knowledge about special education needs and inclusive teaching practices. Many teachers feel unprepared to address the diverse learning needs of individuals with disabilities, such as ADHD, dyslexia, and other conditions (Mitchell, 2021). The lack of training and understanding regarding inclusive policies, classroom management, and personalized instruction exacerbates these difficulties (Gyasi et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these challenges became even more difficult as non-special education teachers struggled with online learning, adapting teaching methods, and designing appropriate tasks for learners with special needs (Pedroso et al., 2022). Addressing these issues requires effective teamwork and professional training to support teachers in meeting the needs of these learners and fostering inclusive learning environments (Bryan, 2023).

General education teachers who handle learners with special needs encounter various difficulties, which can lead to negative feelings and stress (Omoso & Villarente, 2024). In Nigeria, problems like teachers' lack of skills, insufficient encouragement, and the seriousness of students' learning disabilities add to these negative feelings (Uko, 2018). In New York City, there were differences in how general and special education teachers felt about students with disabilities. Special education teachers usually have more positive feelings (Di Maggio, 2020), whereas general education teachers who handle learners with disabilities often feel less confident because of the unique challenges LSENs bring; thus, this requires special ways to build their confidence (Love et al., 2019). Further, stress is made worse by the disruptive behaviors of students with special needs, whose actions like aggression and communication problems are seen as very stressful (Amstad & Müller, 2020). Furthermore, teachers face difficulties implementing behavior management strategies, highlighting the need for practical training, while burnout from the demands of their roles affects their efficacy and the broader educational environment (Alhwaiti, 2022; Oh, 2023).

Moreover, teachers also frequently face significant difficulties when dealing with parents who are not supportive, particularly those parents of learners with special needs (Mahase, 2022). These problems include parents refusing to accept their child's condition, having unrealistic expectations, and being too protective or neglectful, which exacerbates teachers' stress (Prakke & Van Peet, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened this because parents had trouble teaching and felt overwhelmed by online learning activities (Balgos & Villarente, 2022). In addition, teachers encounter resistance from parents when trying to address learning disabilities, with some parents setting unattainable goals for their children or not appreciating the teachers' efforts (Av, 2021; Chandramuki et al., 2012). These tense relationships can reduce teachers' job satisfaction and engagement, highlighting the importance of improved cooperation between teachers and parents and the need for additional teacher training (Mann & Gilmore, 2021; Oranga et al., 2022).

Managing the behavior of students with special needs in inclusive classrooms is also a challenge for general education teachers. These disruptive behaviors include aggression, sudden emotional reactions, and task avoidance, which can affect the learning environment (Amstad & Müller, 2020). Additionally, these students might exhibit harmful actions such as hitting, spitting, or self-harm (Lba, 2022; Haddad, 2020). Teachers use special behavior plans; however, managing LSENs' behaviors remains a highly stressful task despite these efforts. Therefore, professional development and collaborative networks are essential to help teachers cope and foster an inclusive educational environment (Rafailes & Marikit, 2024).

General education teachers play a crucial role in the success of inclusive education, particularly in supporting learners with special needs. This underscores the need for additional support, especially in developing individualized education plans (Ecoben, 2019). Studies show that the effectiveness of inclusive education depends significantly on teachers' training, and enhancing their skills often involves ongoing professional development (Montederamos & Cañon, 2022). Teachers also need continuous support, including emotional and moral assistance, as well as professional workshops to help them adapt teaching methods for diverse learners (Arduino et al., 2022; Thomas, 2023).

2.2. Coping Mechanisms of General Education Teachers

General education teachers use the Internet to enhance their skills when faced with challenges and to make education accessible to all students. A study by Omoso and Villarente

(2024) found that teachers utilized online resources to support learners with special needs better. Teachers can acquire new knowledge, share ideas, and refine their teaching methods using online tools, promoting more inclusive education. In addition, digital tools are valuable for accessing necessary resources but also present various challenges (Purcell et al., 2024).

General education teachers also demonstrate flexibility in meeting the diverse needs of learners by employing various teaching methods to support those with special needs. According to Quizana (2023), teachers working with LSENs encountered behavioral issues, communication difficulties, and limited resources; however, they effectively addressed these challenges through differentiated instruction, emotional support, and professional training. Collaboration with other teachers was also a key strategy for overcoming these difficulties (Abellana et al., 2023). Furthermore, teachers are using positive reinforcement as an effective method to increase participation and encourage good behavior among students (Dias, 2024).

Moreover, general education teachers collaborate with special education professionals to develop SPED skills and effectively implement inclusive education strategies, highlighting their reliance on support systems. Teachers value discussions with special education team members, as these interactions provide essential advice and guidance, enabling them to better address all students' needs (Auscavitch, 2022). Co-teaching and peer support are crucial, as they help alleviate the stress experienced by teachers who lack specialized training in inclusive classrooms, fostering a sense of shared responsibility (Omoso & Villarente, 2024). Furthermore, support from school leaders and access to professional development opportunities are essential for teachers to implement individualized education plans (IEPs) and adapt lessons for students with disabilities (Abellana et al., 2023). Therefore, inclusive education's success depends on strong collaboration, continuous training, and a collective commitment to student progress (Pruitt, 2021).

In addition, general education teachers often rely on their strong belief in God to navigate the challenges of working with learners with disabilities. Strategies such as spiritual healing, humor, meditation, and religious support are among the primary methods teachers use to reduce stress and maintain emotional balance in inclusive classrooms (Macmbinji & Pwani, 2018; Alegarbes, 2022). Faith not only provides emotional support but also empowers teachers to face their challenges from a religious perspective, strengthening their sense of self and resilience during difficult times (Phillips, 2021). Although sometimes criticized, this faith-

based approach is viewed as a way to remain calm and grounded, helping educators stay resilient in challenging teaching situations (Ozcan et al., 2021).

2.3. Theoretical Lens

Piaget's theory of constructivism (1964) served as a foundation for this inquiry. The theory proposes that individuals cultivate knowledge by connecting their experiences with their ideas. It also emphasizes that learning occurs through active engagement with others and the environment, allowing individuals to derive insights from these interactions. Moreover, Piaget accentuated that learning is an active process where people establish knowledge by relating or connecting their existing perspectives or experiences from newly obtained ideas or insights.

The lens of Piaget's theory of constructivism sheds light on how teachers create meaningful learning opportunities by connecting their knowledge to the various experiences of handling learners with special educational needs. Teachers recognize that LSENs have distinct learning needs; with this understanding, they can leverage their prior knowledge and experience to build new concepts that can aid them with their difficulties in handling LSENs. Moreover, teachers use their experience and prior knowledge to reflect on their practices and adjust based on the responses and feedback from their learners.

In this study, the theory of constructivism provides an insightful framework for understanding general education teachers' lived experiences in handling learners with special educational needs, as it emphasizes that individuals primarily construct knowledge based on their experiences. The theory also underscores the importance of hands-on experience and the connection between prior and newly acquired knowledge, strengthening the context of this research. Additionally, through the lens of constructivism, this study offers clarity and insight into the challenges teachers face when handling learners with special educational needs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The qualitative research method was utilized in this study, enabling the researcher to construct a holistic picture, report detailed informant views, and conduct the study in a natural setting (Creswell, 2019). The researcher collected rich and detailed information on the teachers' experiences and perspectives through the qualitative research method. These qualitative data include their challenges and views about handling learners with special educational needs in a

general education context. Specifically, the study employed a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is a qualitative research design that explores an individual's lived experiences regarding a specific topic (Creswell, 2019). This design enabled the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews with general education teachers who handled learners with special educational needs. It is appropriate for the study because it investigates participants' subjective and lived experiences. Moreover, it allows a thorough examination of the perspectives of general education teachers and the meanings associated with their interactions with learners with special educational needs.

3.2. Research Participants

General education teachers from public elementary schools were involved in the study. Participants were merely constrained to elementary teachers since special education services were offered only in two public elementary schools in the local setting. Seventeen participants were chosen intentionally for the study. There were 10 participants interviewed for in-depth interviews (IDI), and seven were interviewed for a focus group discussion (FGD). Specifically, criterion-based sampling was utilized to identify individuals who contributed information using their knowledge. Participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (a) Participants should have experience handling learners with special needs in a general education setting; (b) participants should have a minimum of three years of teaching experience to ensure they have significant exposure to teaching learners with special educational needs; (c) participants should work in a general education setting, such as a public elementary school; and (d) participants should be teaching in Kidapawan City division to provide localized perspectives.

It can be gleaned from table 1 that the majority of the participants were females; there were nine females in the IDI and five females in the FGD, while there was one male in the IDI and two males in the FGD. The data also reveals a complete representation of teachers throughout grade levels, from grade one to grade six. Regarding educational backgrounds, the data shows that all teachers hold bachelor's degrees in elementary education, majoring in general education, while two teachers have also earned master's degrees in educational management. In addition, none of the participants asserted receiving comprehensive training or workshops regarding handling learners with special educational needs.

Table 1*Demographic characteristics*

Code	Gender	Age	Grade Level	Educational Background	Relevant SPED Training	Total Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Experience in Handling LSEs
IDI#1	F	38	5	BEED-Generalist	None	11	6
IDI#2	F	30	5	BEED-Generalist	None	8	7
IDI#3	F	29	6	BEED-Generalist	None	7	5
IDI#4	F	33	3	BEED/MAEM	None	11	7
IDI#5	F	41	5	BEED-Generalist	None	18	6
IDI#6	M	35	2	BEED-Generalist	None	11	5
IDI#7	F	38	1	BEED-Generalist	None	13	6
IDI#8	F	44	2	BEED-Generalist	None	19	6
IDI#9	F	46	4	BEED-Generalist	None	23	6
IDI#10	F	44	4	BEED/MAEM	None	18	5
FGD#1	F	51	1	BEED-Generalist	None	27	5
FGD#2	F	44	4	BEED-Generalist	None	21	5
FGD#3	M	36	2	BEED-Generalist	None	13	7
FGD#4	M	31	2	BEED-Generalist	None	8	5
FGD#5	F	41	5	BEED-Generalist	None	19	6
FGD#6	F	49	6	BEED-Generalist	None	26	5
FGD#7	F	46	3	BEED-Generalist	None	22	6

The table also provides insights into the collective teaching experience of the participants, which spans from seven to twenty-seven years. In addition, the number of years in handling LSEs was explicitly recorded. The data reveals consistent figures for years in handling LSEs for both IDI and FGD; there were three teachers with seven years of experience, seven teachers with six years of experience, and seven teachers with five years of experience.

3.3. Data Sources

The study collected data from general education teachers with experience in handling learners with special educational needs through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The research instrument utilized in this study was an in-depth interview guide constructed by the researcher. It consisted of a series of interview questions to gather valuable data for this study, which included guide and probing questions to extract useful information. The interview questions were undergone through a series of consultations and validations from a pool of experts in special education and research studies to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

3.4. Data Analysis

The thematic analysis method was employed to extract themes from the text by analyzing the word and sentence structure. Specifically, in analyzing the data, six significant steps were undertaken, as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Moreover, data source triangulation was utilized to validate the results of the prime participants of the study by comparing their responses with those of the other set of participants experiencing the same phenomenon.

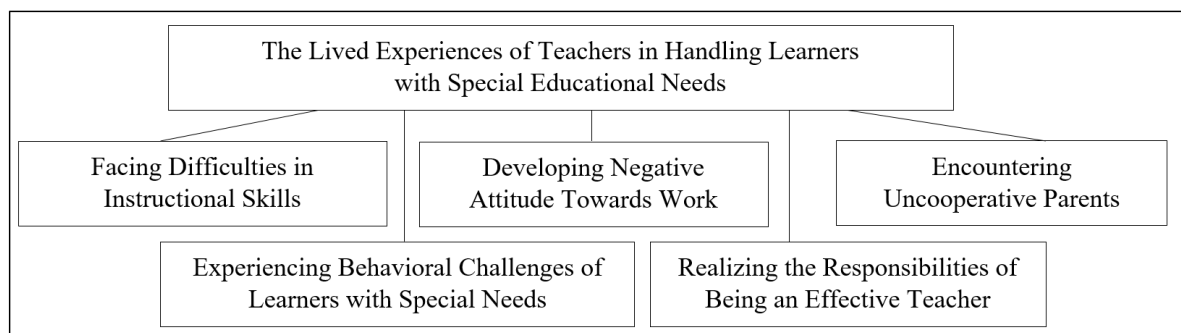
3.5. Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained the participants' agreement and approval before performing the study. In this context, the researcher drafted and accomplished the informed consent forms approved by the University of Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee. The informed consent forms were used to obtain the participants' consent and voluntary participation. The participants were provided with all the necessary information about the study's purpose and the meaning of their participation so they could make a deliberate decision to participate or not. Furthermore, the confidentiality and privacy of the participants were strictly observed. It was also ensured that their responses remained anonymous to protect the participants' privacy. The records obtained were only used for this study, not as a source or reference for other research.

4. Findings and Discussion

Figure 1

Thematic map of the lived experiences of teachers in handling learners with special educational needs



Facing difficulties in instructional skills. This theme implies that teachers encounter complexities in providing effective instruction to learners with special educational needs. Teachers experienced this instructional issue because they lacked skills and understanding about various learning disabilities. Their statements were as follows:

“I feel uncertain about how to assist or teach them because I lack experience and training” (Personal Communication IDI #1, 04/11/24).

“I want to learn how to teach learners with special educational needs (LSEs), but my knowledge in this area is limited” (Personal Communication IDI #2, 04/11/24).

“One of my challenges is figuring out how to support them effectively and apply the appropriate teaching methods” (Personal Communication IDI #9, 04/11/24).

“My challenge lies in the instructional aspect, as I’m unsure how to teach these types of learners. I also haven’t received training on supporting students with special needs” (Personal Communication FGD #3, 04/12/24).

The theme corresponds with the findings in the study of Gyasi et al. (2020), which found that teachers also held limited in-depth knowledge about special education, which compelled them to face difficulties in teaching learners with special needs. Teachers' lack of SPED knowledge restrains them from providing quality education for learners with disabilities. Consequently, if teachers are ill-prepared because they do not possess the essential SPED skills and knowledge, they will encounter instructional difficulties in responding to the diverse demands of LSEs (Olayvar, 2022). Providing adequate instruction to learners with special educational needs is exceptionally challenging, especially if teachers lack the skills and understanding to teach learners with various learning preferences and difficulties; thus, it is necessary to consider that all teachers must be trained to develop their competence in handling learners with special needs (Mandabon, 2023).

Developing negative attitude towards work. This theme conveys that handling LSEs led teachers to establish a pessimistic mindset toward their work. A contributing factor to this negative disposition was the alarming behavior of LSEs, such as sudden outbursts, refusal to

follow teachers' directions, and aggression, which caused classroom disturbances that led to teachers feeling unmotivated. Their responses are indicated as follow:

“It’s disheartening, and at times I lose the motivation to teach because handling them can be exhausting” (Personal Communication IDI #3, 04/11/24).

I sometimes lose the motivation to teach. There are days when I hesitate to go to school, fearing that this child might have another tantrum.” (Personal Communication IDI #6, 04/11/24).

“It drains my motivation to teach, making it tempting to leave the profession. I feel constantly stressed because of this, and it affects me both emotionally and physically” (Personal Communication FGD #4, 04/12/24).

“I feel a bit frustrated, as I was assigned these students without having any background or prior experience with them” (Personal Communication FGD #6, 04/12/24).

The theme also resonates with the study of Di Maggio (2020), where general education teachers showed a less favorable attitude toward their work, specifically in behavioral and affective aspects. It was also determined that the teachers’ poor self-efficacy drove them to have a negative attitude toward working with LSENs. If a teacher has low self-efficacy in handling LSENs, teachers will have a negative view or attitude regarding their work (Love et al., 2019). Furthermore, the prevailing reason teachers develop negative attitudes about their work is the concerning behavior of some LSENs. It was highlighted in the study of Amstad and Müller (2020) that the violent behavior of LSENs is the most stressful behavior that teachers are apprehensive about. This behavior includes hitting, biting, kicking, or talking about suicide. These behavioral issues created a negative learning environment that pressures teachers and intensifies their stress and fatigue (Alhwaiti, 2022).

Encountering uncooperative parents. One reason that makes their work in handling LSENs more complex is encountering uncooperative parents. General education teachers felt distressed when they encountered parents who did not disclose and were in denial about the actual condition of their children and who were unwilling to discuss or talk. The responses they provided are as follows:

“Another challenge I face is that some parents are in denial, making it difficult for me to communicate that their child needs support” (Personal Communication IDI #4, 04/11/24).

“...some parents seem to simply ignore these challenges, remaining in denial and unable to accept that their children have these needs” (Personal Communication IDI #6, 04/11/24).

“A major challenge for me is the lack of support from parents. I’ve tried reaching out to them, but they don’t seem interested in engaging or offering help. It appears they are still in denial about their child’s condition” (Personal Communication FGD #5, 04/12/24).

“When there’s a PTA meeting, not all parents attend, which becomes a missed opportunity for me to discuss their children’s behavior with them” (Personal Communication FGD #6, 04/12/24).

A comparable problem emerged in the study of Balgos and Villarente (2022), which highlighted teachers' awareness of the lack of parental cooperation in the education of learners with special needs. They perceived that some parents were uncooperative because of their work responsibilities. These were low-income parents who had to work harder to meet the needs of their families and opted to dedicate their time to earning money for daily necessities rather than attending meetings. Another determinant of parent unsupportiveness is their reluctance to accept their children's condition. They refuse to accept this situation because they fear their child will confront various adversities in life or face rejection from others (Mann & Gilmore, 2021).

Experiencing behavioral challenges of learners with special needs. Learners with special needs may display disturbing behavior relative to their condition that needs appropriate intervention. LSEN’s behavior differs from one to another, thus making it more difficult for teachers to handle them and leading to classroom management difficulties. Outlined are their responses:

“...when I reprimanded him, he punched me in the back, and I couldn’t defend myself—it hurt. Then, others started yelling at me because they didn’t understand why they were being reprimanded” (Personal Communication IDI #3, 04/11/24).

“...when you're teaching, and they're running around, not listening, it truly tests your patience. I've tried various strategies to help them settle down, but nothing seems to work” (Personal Communication IDI #5, 04/11/24).

“I experienced trauma while handling a student with autism who tended to hurt classmates” (Personal Communication IDI #8, 04/11/24).

“If one of my pupils throws a tantrum, he suddenly starts shouting and causing a scene, sometimes even picking fights or disrupting his classmates” (Personal Communication FGD #2, 04/12/24).

The study conducted by Amstad and Müller (2020) reflected a similar concern, noting that learners with special needs frequently manifest a high incidence of disruptive behavior. The study also revealed that the antisocial behavior of LSENs is the most stressful behavior experienced by teachers. Matching findings from the research of Rafailes and Marikit (2024) found that the main obstacle for general education teachers in handling LSENs is their behavioral problems displayed within the classroom. Teachers found it challenging due to the lack of familiarity with learners with special needs.

Realizing the responsibilities of being an effective teacher. The participants also conveyed their issues regarding the responsibilities of being teachers of learners with special educational needs. To be an effective teacher in handling LSENs, they discerned that it is a must to provide learning opportunities to these learners, utilize innovative strategies for classroom learning, and establish a better teacher-learner engagement through proper communication and intervention. They viewed it as a waste of time if learners were not being helped in their learning process. Their statements were as follows:

“I really can't give them enough time to learn. I also have limited teaching hours, so I can't give them my time” (Personal Communication IDI #2, 04/11/24).

“I feel ineffective as a teacher because it seems like they're not learning anything. The books aren't being utilized, and they're not writing anything down” (Personal Communication IDI #3, 04/11/24).

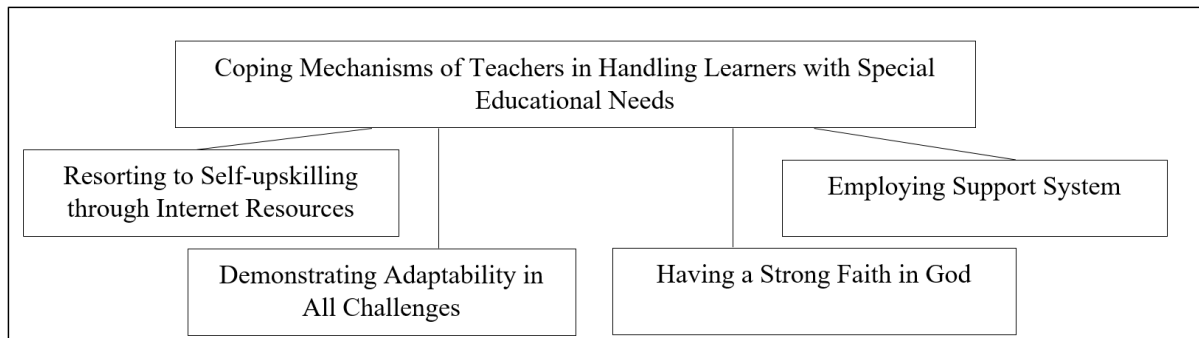
“I continue to struggle because I'm not a SPED teacher or a professional trained to address their needs effectively. The appropriate professionals should truly be the ones to support them” (Personal Communication IDI #6, 04/11/24).

“I'll experiment with various strategies to help them learn more effectively and keep pace with their classmates” (Personal Communication FGD #2, 04/12/24).

The result parallels the study of Ecoben (2019) that public school teachers in the Department of Education were cognizant of their responsibilities in handling learners with special needs. It was determined that one obligation that teachers should provide is appropriate teaching strategies tailored to the needs of LSENs. The investigation of Arcuino et al. (2022) also indicated that teachers were concerned about their responsibility in the holistic development of LSENs. This implies that teachers should guide LSENs in areas beyond academics and teach skills to help them overcome life struggles.

Figure 2

A thematic map on overcoming the challenges in handling learners with special educational needs.



Resorting to self-upskilling through internet resources. To bridge their shortcomings in handling LSENs, these teachers viewed videos from YouTube on how to deal with LSENs, researched from Google for more information about special education, and visited other sources on the internet for possible ways helpful for LSENs. Some of the participants applied these strategies, as they stated:

“I ask for help from Google. After using Google, I then go to YouTube. Many videos on YouTube are very helpful in managing these types of learners” (Personal Communication IDI #1, 04/11/24).

“I’m also researching and watching videos on YouTube to learn how to handle them effectively” (Personal Communication FGD #6, 04/12/24).

“I’m searching on Google for ways to teach them. It’s very helpful to look up information or watch videos on YouTube, as you can learn effective strategies for handling learners with special needs” (Personal Communication FGD #7, 04/12/24).

The theme concurs with the research findings of Omoso and Villarente (2024) where general education teachers utilize digital platforms to find information that can assist them in handling LSENs. These teachers navigate the internet as a reinforcement to help them acquire SPED knowledge efficiently. The internet has also influenced the role of teachers in their teaching and favored them in accessing content and materials that could support them with the challenges in their work. Moreover, the study by Balgos and Villarente (2022) revealed that videos on the Internet were beneficial in overcoming challenges in teaching learners with special needs, and watching online videos positively influences teachers' profound learning and motivation.

Demonstrating adaptability in all challenges. This theme exemplifies the adaptability of the teachers in responding to the issues they encountered in handling LSENs. They display adaptability by adjusting how topics are taught, finding ways to extend help to learners with special needs, being flexible in dealing with learners, modifying teaching strategies, and taking an enlightening new approach to handling learners with special needs. The theme was extracted from the responses as stated:

“We need to apply different strategies and learn how to handle them properly” (Personal Communication IDI #2, 04/11/24).

“I’m still experimenting and discovering what strategies are applicable and what aren’t. You can’t expect a particular approach to be effective right away; patience is essential. It’s important to experiment to determine what works best for them” (Personal Communication IDI #5, 04/11/24).

“I need to find ways to identify what is effective and what isn’t in addressing my challenges with them, particularly regarding their behavior. I shouldn’t focus

solely on regular students, as other types of learners also require attention”
(Personal Communication IDI #10, 04/11/24).

“There should be adjustments, such as allowing them more time to complete tasks and making those tasks shorter” (Personal Communication FGD #3, 04/12/24).

The theme aligns with the study of Quizana (2023), which revealed that implementing differentiated instructions was one strategy teachers employed to handle challenges in handling LSENs. Using varied teaching methods, LSENs were consistently occupied and motivated to participate. It was contended by Auscavitch (2022) that differentiated instruction is about personalizing lessons to accommodate each student's distinct needs. The instruction is adjusted based on the learners' preferences, struggles, and strengths but maintains the same learning objective as others. Through these methods, teachers can mitigate problematic behaviors mainly posed by LSENs during class discussions.

Employing support system. This theme reveals that the participants were leveraging a support system to help them cope with the issues they faced in handling LSENs. The participants collaborated with their colleagues, sought advice from SPED teachers, and provided updates on the learners' development for improvement, recommendations, or counseling. The following were their statements:

“I frequently ask my colleagues for advice on what’s best, and we also have master teachers (MTs) who can guide me on what to do” (Personal Communication IDI #2, 04/11/24).

“I’m not embarrassed to ask for help. I seek guidance from those who are more experienced, as they have a wealth of knowledge compared to me” (Personal Communication IDI #3, 04/11/24).

“My strategy is to communicate with their parents. I provide updates on their child's academic progress and also report on their behavior” (Personal Communication FGD #4, 04/12/24).

“I communicate with the parents regularly through messages, providing updates on what their child is doing in the classroom” (Personal Communication FGD #6, 04/12/24).

Establishing a support system was also one of the strategies employed by the participants in the study of Auscavitch (2022). The study indicated that general education teachers had specific consultation schedules with special education teachers. It was also reported that teachers could gain further insights into their learner's educational history because of their strong relationship with special education teachers. Similarly, Omoso and Villarente (2024) revealed that both SPED and non-SPED teachers relied on their co-teachers for emotional and professional support to overcome issues with SPED skills, resources, and managing LSENs. General education teachers must collaborate with other professionals, especially SPED teachers, to acquire the necessary special education proficiencies and to effectively support learners with special needs (Pinter et al., 2021).

Having a strong faith in God. This theme brings to light the spiritual aspect of some participants. To soothe their worries about the challenges they experience, they uphold the belief that all challenges are a gateway to heaven and that challenges are part of God's plan. The participants manifested a strong connection with God, as they stated:

“Lord, gave me these challenges because they need help” (Personal Communication IDI #7, 04/11/24).

“...these challenges are our gateway to heaven. It's a plan of God. (Personal Communication #9, 04/11/24).

“Pray always. Always ask for guidance” (Personal Communication FGD #3, 04/12/24).

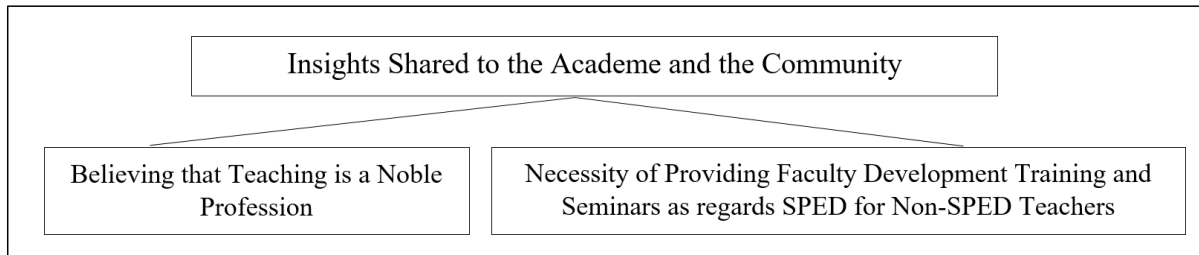
“Let's pray to be given strength and good health so we can continue to help students in need” (Personal Communication FGD #7, 04/12/24).

The theme is identical to the analysis of Macmbinji and Pwani (2018), where certain teachers employed an emotion-focused strategy, particularly spiritual healing, to mitigate their difficulties in teaching children with disabilities. This is further corroborated by the research of Alegarbes (2022), by which teachers joined religious organizations and sought religious support to manage the stress of handling students with disabilities. Faith has a vital role in making teachers resilient amidst difficulties. It is also an effective tool for resolving conflicts and promotes self-control during adverse situations in school (Phillips, 2021). Moreover,

Ozcan et al. (2021) elucidated that sound mental health can be strengthened through faith-based mechanisms. It can likewise aid people in cultivating inner peace and stability during challenging circumstances.

Figure 3

A thematic map showing the extracted themes and insights shared with the academe and the community



Believing that teaching is a noble profession. This theme denotes the participants' insights on the significance of their profession, especially in handling LSEs. It encompasses concepts such as extending guidance to learners with special needs regarding discipline, exerting more effort in teaching LSEs, nurturing their potential with the regular learners, and giving extra time to communicate with LSEs and their parents. Their responses are indicated:

“We should be understanding and empathetic toward them, recognizing that they need support. As teachers, we should use all our resources and abilities to help them as much as possible” (Personal Communication IDI #2, 04/11/24).

“Since we’re in the field of teaching, we should extend our patience even further. Let’s take the time to explore their backgrounds and understand their needs so we can determine the best approach for each of them” (Personal Communication IDI #3, 04/11/24).

“We must put in a great deal of effort to support their learning. We should also continue improving ourselves to effectively meet the needs of these learners” (Personal Communication IDI #5, 04/11/24).

“We need to love and support all our children equally. Every child deserves fair treatment, whether they have special needs or not” (Personal Communication FGD #2, 04/12/24).

“We should collaborate with parents and other teachers, especially SPED teachers, as they can help us address our challenges” (Personal Communication FGD #4, 04/12/24).

Special education teachers are trained and skilled professionals in handling learners with various disabilities, yet they still experience difficulties teaching and managing LSEs (Karabiyik & Avcioglu, 2021). This suggests that the challenge is even greater for non-SPED teachers. General education teachers are non-SPED teachers who fill the gap left by the limited number of SPED teachers. Despite the lack of proper training and SPED skills, general education teachers still put forth their utmost effort to provide quality education to their learners with special needs (Omoso & Villarente, 2024). Moreover, for the community to progress and gain knowledge, someone should embody professional attributes and teach noble things, and these responsibilities can only be provided by the teachers (Parsons, 2022). In addition, the community must acknowledge teaching as a noble profession because teachers are producers of other professionals. Without teachers, it would be a significant challenge for each community member to achieve their dreams (Ntshangase, 2021).

Necessity of faculty development training and seminars for Non-SPED teachers.

This theme points to the idea that general education teachers or non-SPED teachers must be provided with opportunities to undergo professional development in special education. Their feedback is presented as follows:

“We haven’t received any training. It feels like we’re given students with special needs and expected to figure out how to support them on our own” (Personal Communication IDI #2, 04/11/24).

“I need specific knowledge to effectively support them. It’s not something I can simply figure out; it requires expertise. Teachers working with these learners should have proper training, which I’m looking forward to receiving” (Personal Communication IDI #4, 04/11/24).

“I believe almost none of us received this kind of training, which is why I struggled with teaching. Additionally, there isn’t much support from the administration” (Personal Communication FGD #3, 04/12/24).

The same point was highlighted in the study of Auscavitch (2022), which states that school leaders and administrators should provide support and continuous professional training to mainstream classroom teachers or non-spced teachers to strengthen their capabilities in handling learners with disabilities. Most general education teachers were trained to provide

adaptive teaching methods in a general education classroom; this suggests that their theoretical knowledge and skills in special education were limited. Hence, the government and academic institutions must provide opportunities to enable these teachers to efficiently bridge their knowledge gaps and digest special education competencies (Babar, 2021).

5. Conclusion

The findings of this research imply that teachers lacking sufficient knowledge, skills, and experience in handling LSENs may face various challenges affecting their emotional stability, spiritual well-being, and physical health. The findings further indicate that the struggles they experience weaken their enthusiasm to provide adequate education and hinder their ability to deliver the best work in their profession. Moreover, the unfavorable circumstances that teachers experience drive them to adopt or develop numerous coping strategies that could support them in navigating the challenges they encounter in handling LSENs. In addition, skill-building sessions and professional development should not be limited to special education teachers. Schools Division should also equip general education teachers with the necessary SPED skills and knowledge as these teachers address the gap left by the shortage of SPED teachers. Most significantly, the Department of Education should strengthen its frameworks to safeguard teachers from LSENs with alarming behavior and offer additional support that empowers teachers' commitment to quality education, especially in special education.

This study has certain defined objectives that limit its scope and findings; thus, future researchers may utilize other methods or explore further issues concerning special education, specifically teachers handling learners with special educational needs. Future researchers may utilize mixed methods research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem by collecting numerical and descriptive data. It is strongly recommended that future research should delve into teachers at different education levels. They may examine teachers in elementary, high school, and senior high school settings to compare and understand the influence of grade levels on their approach to handling LSENs. Furthermore, prospective studies may examine the experience of teachers in handling learners with a specific disability type. This may include learning and physical disabilities, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, and other disabilities to extract insights into how learners with specific disability influence teachers' perspectives and responses.

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