

Navigating special education: A deep dive into the lived experience of SPED teachers

¹John Ellie E. Aguila, ²Kristel P. Lacquio, & ³Juliet C. San Luis

Abstract

Teaching students with special needs presents unique challenges that demand patience, adaptability, and resilience. This qualitative photovoice study explored the lived experiences of SPED teachers to provide an in-depth understanding of their professional journeys. Seven (7) SPED teachers participated in the study selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis. The study identified four (4) major themes: (1) Heartstrings and Challenges: The Emotional Demands of SPED Teaching, (2) Bridging the Gap: Strategies for Enhancing Parental Involvement in SPED, (3) Navigating the Unseen: The Rewards of SPED Teaching, and (4) The Steady Hand: Upholding the Values of Consistency and Patience in SPED. These findings emphasized the emotional toll, coping strategies, and fulfillment experienced by SPED teachers. The study highlights the importance of institutional support, professional development programs, and parental collaboration in enhancing special education. Schools and policymakers must implement targeted interventions to support SPED teachers, ensuring that students with disabilities receive quality education in an inclusive learning environment.

Keywords: *special education, resilience, inclusive education, students with special needs*

Article History:

Received: March 19, 2026

Accepted: May 10, 2026

Revised: April 30, 2026

Published online: June 15, 2026

Suggested Citation:

Aguila, J.E.E., Lacquio, K.P. & San Luis, J.C. (2026). Navigating special education: A deep dive into the lived experience of SPED teachers. *The Research Probe*, 6(1), 155-179. <https://doi.org/10.53378/trp.225>

About the authors:

¹Senior High School student, Calayan Educational Foundation, Inc. Email: ellicaguila032307@gmail.com

²Senior High School student, Calayan Educational Foundation, Inc.

³Corresponding author. Senior High School Science Teacher and Research Adviser. Calayan Educational Foundation, Inc. Email: juliet.sanluis@cefi.edu.ph



© The author (s). Published by Institute of Industry and Academic Research Incorporated.

This is an open-access article published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license, which grants anyone to reproduce, redistribute and transform, commercially or non-commercially, with proper attribution. Read full license details here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

1. Introduction

Special education (SPED) teachers are educators trained to provide specialized instruction and support for students with disabilities and special learning needs. They employ various teaching strategies, accommodations, and modifications to address the unique needs of learners with learning difficulties, physical disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, and developmental delays. Through their expertise, SPED teachers play a vital role in ensuring that all students receive quality education and the support necessary for their academic and personal development (Florian, 2019; Walker et al., 2024; Alhassan et al., 2025). Understanding their role requires examining the broader educational and social contexts in which they work, which includes the evolution of inclusive education policies, changing educational practices, and societal perceptions of disability. These factors shape the experiences of SPED teachers and influence how they carry out their responsibilities within inclusive educational settings (Davis & Florian, 2019).

Despite the significance of their role, SPED teachers encounter numerous professional challenges. Byrd and Alexander (2020) found that many general education teachers lack sufficient awareness and understanding of the requirements involved in working with students with special needs. Similarly, Balading et al. (2023) reported that inadequate government support contributes to difficulties experienced by SPED teachers, including burnout, limited work-life balance, insufficient salaries, and the need to personally fund classroom learning materials. However, while existing studies document these challenges (i.e., Wabingga, 2025; Matjeni & de Jager, 2025; Alahmed, 2024; Cooc, 2019; Alsolami, 2022), they often provide limited insight into the lived experiences of SPED teachers, particularly within specific local contexts. Consequently, there remains a need to better understand how these educators navigate daily challenges, manage emotional demands, and derive meaning from their profession.

In response to these gaps, the present study seeks to explore the lived experiences of SPED teachers by examining the challenges they face, the coping strategies they employ, and their professional development needs. By amplifying the voices and perspectives of SPED teachers and highlighting their contributions to inclusive education, this study aims to generate insights that can inform policies and practices designed to better support educators, enhance student outcomes, and strengthen inclusivity within educational settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Special Education*

SPED is a specialized educational program designed to meet the unique learning needs of children with disabilities. It encompasses a wide range of services that may be delivered through different approaches and settings to ensure that learners receive appropriate support beyond what is typically available in a regular classroom. Through additional assistance, specialized programs, modified environments, and other support services provided at no cost to parents, special education seeks to ensure that every child's educational needs are adequately addressed (Watson, 2019). Because each learner has distinct strengths and challenges, individualized approaches are essential in helping children thrive within structured educational environments (White et al., 2025). Consequently, having a child with special educational needs can be both rewarding and challenging for families (Reichman et al., 2008), requiring continuous support and advocacy.

The development of special education in the Philippines reflects the country's commitment to addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities. Government and nongovernmental organizations have contributed significantly to establishing and expanding SPED services. The history of special education in the Philippines dates back to 1908 with the establishment of a school for the deaf in Harrison, Pasay City, marking the government's early recognition of its responsibility to educate children with disabilities. This initiative was followed by the establishment of the Insular School for the Deaf and Blind in Manila and the Philippine Association for the Deaf. In 1925, the government further strengthened SPED services through the creation of the Welfareville Children's Village in Mandaluyong, which provided educational opportunities for individuals with disabilities (Fundal, 2019).

The legal foundation of inclusive education in the Philippines was further reinforced through Republic Act No. 11650, or the Inclusive Education Act. According to the Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines (2022), the Act affirms the State's responsibility to protect and promote every citizen's right to quality education and to make educational opportunities accessible to all learners. It specifically safeguards the rights of learners with disabilities, including those from linguistic, ethnic, religious, and indigenous groups, by ensuring equal access to education. The law mandates inclusive education, prohibits discrimination against learners with disabilities, promotes lifelong learning opportunities, and

adopts a whole-of-community approach involving schools, academic institutions, government agencies, private organizations, persons with disabilities, and their families.

The implementation of special and inclusive education also requires active participation from parents and educators. Parents often face difficulties in navigating educational systems and advocating for the resources and placements necessary to support their children's learning needs. While successful advocacy can be highly rewarding when it contributes to a child's progress, it can also be emotionally challenging when children's needs remain unmet despite persistent efforts (Sankey, 2021). Similarly, educational systems have evolved in their approach to disability. Early Western models of education viewed disability primarily through a medical lens and often placed learners with disabilities in separate educational settings (Tedeschi & Limeri, 2024). Screening and assessment practices frequently excluded students with behavioral, sensory, physical, or learning difficulties from mainstream classrooms. In contrast, contemporary special education emphasizes individualized instruction and curriculum adaptation (Kocaj, 2025). As noted by Custodio et al. (2021), special education involves designing a curriculum that is tailored to the learner's disability while remaining aligned with standard educational requirements, thereby promoting more equitable and inclusive learning opportunities.

2.2. SPED Teachers

SPED teachers are licensed professionals who specialize in educating students with behavioral, developmental, intellectual, and physical disabilities. Their primary responsibility is to ensure that learners with diverse needs receive quality education and opportunities to maximize their learning potential. To achieve this, SPED teachers collaborate with counselors, therapists, psychologists, and parents to support students' academic, social, and emotional development. Through specialized training, they acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to provide targeted guidance and interventions that help students overcome challenges and achieve their educational goals. They utilize a variety of instructional approaches, combining traditional teaching methods with innovative strategies to address diverse learning needs effectively (Terry, 2020).

The role of SPED teachers extends beyond classroom instruction. Special education programs are designed to support learners with physical, intellectual, social, emotional, or developmental disabilities who may require additional assistance to succeed academically.

Because disabilities vary widely in nature and severity, SPED teachers must employ multiple teaching strategies, accommodations, and interventions to address individual student needs. As certified professionals, they are trained to identify learning difficulties, develop appropriate educational plans, and implement instructional strategies that promote student success (Boerger, 2023). However, these complex responsibilities present significant challenges, requiring educators to continually seek creative ways to provide equitable and high-quality education to students with disabilities (Kaden, 2020).

The profession of special education has evolved alongside changing societal perceptions of disability. Historically, individuals with disabilities were often stigmatized and viewed as cursed, possessed, or intellectually inferior. Significant progress began in 1760 when Charles Michel L'Épée established the first public school for individuals with disabilities in France, focusing on language and phonetics instruction for deaf students. This was followed in 1784 by Valentin Haüy's establishment of the Institution Nationale des Jeunes Aveugles, which became one of the most prominent schools for learners who were blind. Haüy developed instructional methods specifically designed for visually impaired students and successfully educated a young blind boy who later became a teacher. Further advancements occurred in 1887 when Anne Sullivan, widely known as the "miracle worker," taught Helen Keller, a child who was both deaf and blind. These pioneering educators, together with physicians and religious leaders, contributed significantly to the development and expansion of special education worldwide (Turi, 2020).

The effectiveness of special education also depends on instructional leadership and professional competence. Formoso (2019) emphasized the evolving role of instructional supervisors in providing leadership for students with special educational needs. Effective instruction requires teachers to master classroom management routines and specialized teaching strategies. Some educators report that communicating with students with disabilities can initially be difficult, particularly when they lack proficiency in communication systems such as sign language (Alqahtani, 2025; Rindang et al., 2025; Bani Odeh & Lach, 2024). Nevertheless, most SPED teachers work in public schools serving students from preschool through high school and remain committed to ensuring that learners with disabilities receive appropriate educational opportunities (Formoso, 2019).

Despite their essential contributions, SPED teachers face numerous professional and personal challenges. A study by Balading et al. (2023) found that many SPED teachers

experience burnout due to inadequate government support. Teachers often struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance, receive salaries insufficient to support their families, and frequently use personal funds to purchase classroom learning materials. These concerns are compounded by resource limitations, as demonstrated when the Department of Education's proposed budget of 532 million pesos for the SPED program in 2023 was not approved under the National Expenditure Program. Such circumstances contribute to ongoing difficulties in sustaining and strengthening special education services.

These challenges are reflected in broader global trends affecting the profession. Educational and social policies worldwide increasingly emphasize the inclusion of learners with special educational needs in mainstream schools. However, many countries continue to face shortages of qualified special education teachers (Myrie et al., 2024; Fogle et al., 2024). A significant number of experienced educators are approaching retirement, while fewer individuals are entering the profession to replace them (With, 2017). Moreover, the demanding nature of special education, particularly when working with students who exhibit challenging behaviors, often results in high levels of stress, burnout, and teacher attrition. Consequently, beyond professional training and certification, SPED teachers must possess personal qualities such as patience, resilience, empathy, and commitment to ensure that their work remains both effective and personally fulfilling.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of SPED teachers in teaching students with disabilities. Specifically, it utilized the photovoice method, a participatory action research approach that enables individuals from marginalized and underrepresented groups to document and share their lived experiences through photography.

Photovoice is designed to empower participants by providing them with a platform to express their perspectives and realities visually. Through this process, participants are encouraged to reflect on their experiences and contribute to meaningful social change (O'Malley & Munsell, 2020). The method is particularly suitable for exploring personal and often overlooked narratives, making it an effective approach for capturing the untold stories of SPED teachers.

3.2. Population and Sampling

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques in selecting its participants. Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals who could provide rich and relevant information aligned with the objectives of the study. This technique enables researchers to maximize limited research resources by selecting participants who are most likely to contribute meaningful insights (Campbell, 2020). In addition, snowball sampling was utilized to facilitate the identification and recruitment of participants through referrals, a strategy that is particularly useful when members of the target population are not easily accessible.

The selection of participants was guided by the following inclusion criteria: (1) must be a SPED teacher, (2) must have at least one to three years of experience teaching students with disabilities, and (3) must be willing to share and express their experiences. Based on these criteria, seven (7) SPED teachers from private schools in Lucena City, Philippines were purposively selected to participate in the study.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Duration of Teaching
Jen	29	Single	2 years and 7 months
Mav	26	Single	1 year and 11 months
Ish	34	Single	14 years
Sel	26	Single	2 years
Hon	24	Single	1 year and 7 months
Mar	24	Single	1 year
Cha	26	Single	2 years

3.3. Data Gathering Procedure

Focus group discussion and individual interviews were utilized as the primary data-gathering method because they provide a deeper understanding of social issues in qualitative research. They are particularly appropriate when limited information is available about a phenomenon and when participants are expected to provide comprehensive insights. Interviews are also effective for exploring sensitive topics that individuals may be reluctant to discuss in a group setting.

Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The researchers provided sufficient information regarding the study to enable participants to make voluntary and informed decisions about their involvement. Upon agreeing to participate, the qualified participants signed the consent forms, formally initiating the research process.

As part of the photovoice procedure, participants were provided with three prompts one week before the focus group discussion to guide them in capturing photographs related to the study topics. A focus group discussion was then conducted to encourage participants to share their collective experiences, foster empowerment, and ensure that their voices were heard. To further explore the issues that emerged during the discussion, follow-up individual interviews were conducted.

Using the introductory question, “*What are the lived experiences of SPED teachers?*” the researchers employed a semi-structured interview approach. Participants were encouraged to describe their experiences freely using their own language. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations. Throughout the interviews, the researchers provided minimal direction and relied on reflective rather than leading questions. This semi-structured format enabled participants to guide the conversation. The participants’ availability was also considered when scheduling the interviews.

Following each interview, audio recordings were immediately transferred to a laptop and backed up on an external storage device for safekeeping and transcription. The researchers then transcribed the recordings and extracted significant words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs relevant to the study. In addition to the verbal responses, field notes were used to document nonverbal cues, including body language and other observable behaviors, to enrich data interpretation.

To ensure confidentiality and ethical data management, all research data were securely stored throughout the study. Three years after the completion of the research, digital files were permanently deleted using data-removal software, while all non-digital materials were disposed of in an environmentally responsible manner.

3.4. Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the conduct of the study to uphold the principles of integrity, respect, and the pursuit of knowledge and truth. Prior to data

collection, the research protocol, including the interview questions and procedures, was reviewed and approved by the research adviser to ensure compliance with ethical standards.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Each participant was fully informed about the purpose of the study, the research procedures, and any potential risks associated with participation. Before the commencement of the study, informed consent was obtained from all participants, signifying their willingness to take part in the research.

The researchers also ensured the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the information they shared. To safeguard their identities, pseudonyms were assigned to all co-researchers and were used throughout the study. Participants were likewise consulted regarding their availability to ensure that interview schedules were conducted at their convenience.

In addition, the researchers maintained honesty, transparency, and accuracy in all forms of communication related to the study. Participants were informed about the procedures for data collection, analysis, use, storage, and eventual disposal. The researchers further ensured that the findings were presented truthfully and were free from misinformation, misrepresentation, or biased interpretation of the data.

3.5. Data Analysis

To analyze the transcribed responses, the study employed the reflexive thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2022). This method provides a systematic framework for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data through a six-step analytical process.

According to Miranda et al. (2023), data familiarization involves immersing oneself in the data to identify patterns, meanings, and significant insights. During this phase, the researchers repeatedly read and reviewed the interview transcripts while taking detailed notes. The next step involved generating initial codes by organizing and labeling meaningful segments of data into relevant categories. Subsequently, initial themes were developed through the examination and interpretation of patterns across the coded data. These themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure that they were coherent, meaningful, and adequately supported by the data. Once the themes were finalized, the researchers defined and organized the narratives associated with each theme to capture the essence of the participants' experiences. The final phase involved producing the research report by providing a comprehensive

description and interpretation of each theme and subtheme in relation to the research questions. This process enabled the researchers to present a clear and meaningful account of the lived experiences of the participants.

Figure 1

Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/illustrates-Thematic-Analysis-Braun-Clarke-2006_fig5_380319561

4. Findings and Discussion

Four (4) major themes emerged from the data: (1) Heartstrings and Challenges: The Emotional Demands of SPED Teaching, (2) Bridging the Gap: Strategies for Enhancing Parental Involvement in SPED, (3) Navigating the Unseen: The Rewards of SPED Teaching, and (4) The Steady Hand: Upholding the Values of Consistency and Patience in SPED. The lived experience of all seven participants is reflected in each major theme.

Theme 1: Heartstrings and Challenges: The Emotional Demands of SPED Teaching

This theme highlights the emotional demands of SPED teaching through identification from the narratives on difficulties in teaching, student behavioral issues, struggles with individualized teaching strategies and inconsistent follow-ups at home.

Jen, who has also been teaching students with special needs for two years, shared her experience about the difficulties in teaching.

“It's hard when you have a child and you don't see any progress, especially when the child is, ahmm very low.... Very low, so of course the progress takes a long time; of course, there are times when I get really frustrated. At first, I was really frustrated. I did all the techniques, but the child didn't really make any progress, you know. I was crying.”

Sel recalled her experience that in the behavior of children, there are times when the aggression is really severe to the point where you get scratches and get bitten:

“Yes, he was really aggressive. At that time, of course, I was teaching regular students, so it was difficult for me because I didn't have much knowledge about handling such situations. So, what I did was search and research what I could do. I tried everything I found on Google, but nothing worked. Then, even though our head teacher taught us what to do, no matter what I did, the aggression just wouldn't go away. So, what I did was make him run every morning. I had him run, and I made him carry things. That was the difficult part. Every morning, I would tire him out. And then, after about a month, he started to improve. Yes, after two months, his aggression completely disappeared.”

Figure 2

Photographic evidence of student aggression resulting in scratches and bites



Jen also added that:

“My student shows aggression toward others, so she can bite, scratch, and pinch. Even when we use behavior management techniques to calm her down and restrain her, we still get scratched. There are also times when she bites for no reason, so we always need to stay alert.”

Sel elaborated that she realized that their development didn't match their actual age.

Mav, Hon and *Mar* shared:

“Teaching children with autism is a challenge because you will encounter students who are high-functioning, middle-functioning, and low-functioning”

Sel also stated that:

“I feel sad when I see a child regress after making progress. It's not because I lacked effort, but because the parents didn't follow through with what should be done at home—like restricting certain foods or maintaining routines. When they don't listen or follow the recommendations, it's disheartening. You start off so excited to help the child improve, but then you lose confidence because you know that at home, things aren't being reinforced, and the child won't always speak up about it.”

Beyond the participants' narratives, the findings indicated that the emotional burdens that were experienced by the SPED teachers reflected the concept of their emotional struggle to a broader field, where they control their emotions while handling the students' diverse and complex needs continuously. If the emotional demand was persistent, it would lead to exhaustion and burnout especially in special education, where it is a high-pressured environment (Kariou et al., 2021). Furthermore, the presence of behavioral challenges and slow student progress suggests that the emotional stress is escalated by classroom realities. Special education teachers are more vulnerable to burnout due to their demands and emotional responsibilities required in their roles (Jeon et al., 2021). These findings implied that their emotional difficulties are not isolated experiences but are deeply rooted in the structural and professional demands of SPED teaching.

Theme 2: Bridging the Gap: Strategies for Enhancing Parental Involvement in SPED

This theme highlights the strategies for enhancing parental involvement in SPED through the narratives on encouraging parental and student engagement in learning, family influence on learning, managing manipulative behaviors, developing emotional resilience and using different teaching strategies.

Jen also shared why teamwork between parents and teachers are important to a child's progress:

"So, we can't just stay at their house, especially when some parents are in denial. There are parents who only focus on what their child is currently capable of and don't push for progress. Some even rely entirely on us to handle their children, but it shouldn't be just us. We are here to help them, but it has to be teamwork between parents and teachers. When parents and teachers work together, the child's progress becomes much faster."

Ish shared on how they make parents realize to put an effort on focusing on their child:

"I eventually make parents realize that they really need to put in the effort to focus on their child, especially during the times they need it most. Our goal is that before the child turns five, things become at least a little easier. If they don't start working on it now, whatever they're doing at home will remain chaotic. When you have a child with special needs, everything feels disorganized, your daily routine, your sleep, always rushing, running out of time, and feeling completely exhausted. That means nothing flows smoothly. That's the kind of fluidity I want them to experience, the feeling that things are running more seamlessly. That's why I tell them to put in the effort now, because if they don't, the exhaustion and stress will still be there when their child is older. I really try to persuade parents. That's actually one of the skills I've developed, not perfected, but I've gotten pretty good at convincing parents to take action. Not in a forced way, but in a way that makes them realize, "Hey, you should do this because it's important." Same message, just presented in a way that makes sense to them."

Mav also shared how they help parents:

"Knowledge, we share tips and strategies with parents on how to handle their children's behavioral issues, including ways to correct them. In a way, we also serve as a bridge for children with special needs, helping them get the support they need."

Several participants shared that teaching students with special needs can be both challenging and rewarding. *Jen*, who once considered quitting her job, stated:

"Actually, I've thought about that, especially when I don't see any progress in a child. Of course, you start blaming yourself, wondering, Is there something wrong with me? Am I not an effective teacher? Because when you don't see progress,

it's really tough for us. I've had those thoughts, but then I also think, If I give up on these kids, what will happen to them? What about their future? Their parents will struggle even more. That's why, for me, it's really hard to just walk away from these children. You have to think about it carefully. If you're teaching a neurotypical child and you decide to leave, you can feel at ease because they understand, and you know they'll be fine in the future. But when you leave a child with special needs, someone who already has difficulties, and you're the only one they listen to, suddenly abandoning them will cause distress. They won't easily listen to someone else. That's what makes our job so difficult, we can't just walk away from these kids."

Participants shared that every child is unique and has their own individual needs. They use different teaching strategies for each student to ensure effective learning. *Mav* shared her experience and said that:

"It's a challenge because you have to use different approaches and strategies for each child. It's also a trial-and-error process since your teaching strategies need to be effective. We give tips and strategies on how to handle children with behavioral issues, like how to correct certain behaviors. In a way, we also serve as a bridge for children with special needs."

Figure 3

Manipulatives used in teaching



Mar also highlighted that there are different kinds of approaches on how to handle students:

“Of course, not every student will have the same approach or strategy. Just because a certain approach or strategy is effective for one child doesn’t mean it will be applicable to other students as well.”

This theme showed that while parental involvement is one of the essential factors for student progress, it is often due to factors such as lack of awareness, denial, or limited resources. This reflected a systematic gap in family-school setting collaboration, where schools lack appropriate approaches to engage parents effectively. Research indicates that prominent collaboration between families and educators crucially improves student outcomes, but it requires consistent communication and strong institutional support (Mulyani et al., 2021). Additionally, these findings suggest that without proper reinforcement at home, the effectiveness of classroom interventions is regressed. Teachers also assume additional roles as facilitators and advocates to bridge this gap, which increases their emotional burden and workload.

Theme 3: Navigating the Unseen: The Rewards of SPED Teaching

This theme highlights the rewards of SPED teaching through identification of small milestones as big achievements and fulfillment in seeing student progress. Several participants shared their thoughts on how even small achievements can be considered big accomplishments.

Jen shared that:

“For me, the effort they put in is already a big achievement, and as their teacher, I also consider it my own achievement. For the final question, how can this image educate others? I think it shows that every effort or achievement we make in life, whether big or small, should be appreciated because we worked hard for it.”

Participants shared that they feel a deep sense of fulfillment when they witness their students making progress or showing improvements. *Sel* stated that:

“I chose this because it is the most challenging yet fulfilling thing I can accomplish as a SPED teacher—getting my students to sit in their seats.”

Figure 4

The chair Sel considers an accomplishment



Hon also shared her experience and stated that:

“I chose this picture because we all know that the process of teaching students with special needs can be challenging. But when the pieces come together, it becomes rewarding—not just for my students, but also for me as their teacher. They learn from me, and I also learn from them. When I see a child making progress, it’s like they are slowly coming together like a puzzle. That, for me, is the best reward and achievement”

Figure 5

The chair Hon considers an accomplishment



The participants emphasized small achievements, which highlighted a shift from traditional measures of academic growth towards individualized, progress-based outcomes. These small milestones serve as an indicator of growth for both students and educators. Recognizing gradual progress plays a crucial role in sustaining teacher motivation and job satisfaction (Garwood et al., 2026). These experiences act as resilience factors against burnout by reinforcing a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Despite the challenges that they face that require different kinds of demands; SPED teachers remain committed to their profession because of the emotional rewards that are associated with student development.

Theme 4: The Steady Hand: Upholding the Values of Consistency and Patience in SPED

This theme highlights the importance of upholding the values of consistency and patience in SPED, as reflected in the narratives on mutual growth between students and teachers, the enhancement of teaching and caregiving skills, and the emotional rewards of making a difference in students' lives. The participants frequently mentioned the value of patience in their verbatim accounts, emphasizing that their students also taught them valuable life lessons.

Hon stated that:

“Ah, okay. So before, I wasn't really patient. I wasn't naturally good at patience. Even though I took up education, before I graduated, I was actually considering shifting to a different field. But when I started teaching, that changed. The impact of this experience, aside from teaching me patience, made me realize just how much patience is truly needed. Before, I wasn't really fond of kids, but now, that has completely changed. It's like we help each other. I teach them, but at the same time, they also teach me. They showed me that not everything should be rushed. Seeing their struggles made me realize that it's not easy”

One of the common shared goals of some participants is for their students to make progress or improvements. *Cha* shared:

“It is not easy for five students to walk alongside a person with autism. They are still in the learning process, but now you can see that they can line up and wait for their turn. This makes me feel that there is still progress, even if it is slow. Our next question is: Why did you choose this situation, symbol, or experience? I chose this situation because, as a SPED teacher, I feel happy seeing my students make progress in any way. Their improvements are also an achievement for me.”

Participants shared their thoughts on how they feel a deep sense of fulfillment when they witness their students' improvements and receive appreciation from them. *Cha* also shared that:

“The mother said that the child said, 'I'm so happy.' Then the parents started crying. You know, the mother's tears, the parents' tears—it was because their child could finally speak, because their child was able to do it! That kind of achievement is something that will always stay with us. No matter how difficult it is, when you see moments like that, all the challenges seem to disappear because of that achievement.”

The results showed that patience and consistency are not merely inhibited traits but are acquired through experience and continuous involvement with students. Special education teachers undergo both professional and personal growth as they adapt to the needs of their learners with disabilities. This experience reflects the dynamic nature of SPED teaching, where educators grow alongside their students. Research supports this interpretation by emphasizing that emotional balance and supportive environments play a critical role in minimizing burnout and enhancing teacher well-being (Mulyani et al., 2021). This suggests that patience is not solely an individual characteristic but is also shaped by external factors such as institutional support.

5. Reflective Resonance

Theme 1: Heartstrings and Challenges: The Emotional Demands of SPED Teaching

Special Education is a specialized educational program designed for students with special needs. SPED teachers serve as facilitators, guiding and supporting students in their learning journey. Emotional exhaustion contributes to the overall loss of special educators; nevertheless, few research studies investigate the personal emotional experiences of inexperienced, alternatively licensed special educators (Stark & Koslouski, 2020). Teaching special education has its own set of difficulties and often requires a different approach than in a traditional classroom setting. Children with disorders often exhibit behavioral problems. These challenges may stem from temporary stressful circumstances in an individual's life or indicate longer-lasting disorders (Zahid, 2023). Instructors emphasized the value of specific teaching and student assistance to accommodate all kinds of learning needs. Teachers

displayed their commitment to assisting students in developing their skills in spite of the challenges they faced (Kilag et al., 2024).

Theme 2: Bridging the Gap: Strategies for Enhancing Parental Involvement in SPED

Promoting parental involvement is crucial when helping students with special needs to establish a strong foundation of support for the child. Together, teachers and parents can create a collaborative team that improves student achievement by exchanging insights into the child's educational experience. Parental engagement in special education promotes positive student outcomes and parent-school relationships (Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2020). Parental involvement in a child's education develops an environment of encouragement that improves learning and promotes personal development. Families should also receive adequate and relevant education to better support members with special needs. Achieving the best educational quality necessitates cooperation among teachers, families, and the community, all working towards one common goal. Additionally, creating an effective classroom that emphasizes both education and positive reinforcement can significantly reduce behavioral challenges among students (Scott & Landrum, 2020).

Theme 3: Navigating the Unseen: The Rewards of SPED Teaching

In the journey of raising a child with disabilities, every achievement is worthy of celebration. From mastering a new skill to overcoming a challenge, each milestone represents progress and resilience. Special education or SPED students learn the importance of their achievements, no matter how big or small they are. Celebrating small wins has a positive impact on confidence and creativity. Recognizing their unique skills is crucial for developing confidence and self-esteem. Set realistic goals for your child, celebrate their progress, and provide support and encouragement as they continue to learn and grow (Sanders et al., 2023).

Theme 4: The Steady Hand: Upholding the Values of Consistency and Patience in SPED

According to Guantia and Motus (2023), some educators shared that teaching special learners, while challenging, is also a deeply fulfilling experience, especially when witnessing their students' progress and success. Teachers naturally have expectations for their students, but patience is essential when working with students with disabilities. It is important to provide support without placing excessive pressure on them. Special education goes beyond

instruction; it fosters mutual growth for both students and educators. Education is not solely about earning high grades; it focuses on skill development and knowledge acquisition, helping students grow as individuals.

Figure 6

Symbolic representation of the lived experience of SPED teacher



Source: <https://www.craigslist.com/sports-recreation/cedar-point-will-add-tilt-coaster-sirens-curse-next-season>

After gaining deeper insights and reflecting on their experiences, the participants selected a rollercoaster as a symbol of their journey as SPED teachers. This image captures the essence of working with students with disabilities and serves as a powerful representation of their professional and personal experiences.

The rollercoaster metaphor illustrates the complex and dynamic nature of SPED teaching. Participants described their careers as a continuous journey marked by emotional highs and lows, requiring resilience, adaptability, and a strong mindset to navigate challenges. Much like the twists and turns of a rollercoaster ride, teaching students with disabilities involves facing uncertainties while remaining committed to supporting learners' growth and development.

This symbolic representation also reflects the major themes that emerged from the study. The rollercoaster highlights the emotional demands of SPED teaching, the need to strengthen parental involvement, the rewards of working in special education, and the importance of consistency and patience in the profession. These experiences, although often challenging, contribute to the meaningful and fulfilling nature of the teachers' work. Furthermore, the various tracks of a rollercoaster symbolize the diverse experiences encountered by SPED teachers throughout their careers. Despite the unpredictability of the journey, the participants emphasized that their dedication and perseverance enable them to continue supporting students with special needs. In this sense, the rollercoaster serves as a fitting metaphor for the courage, commitment, and endurance required to remain steadfast in the field of special education.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of SPED teachers, focusing on the challenges they encountered, the coping strategies they employed, and the personal fulfillment they derived from their profession. Through an in-depth analysis of their narratives, it became evident that SPED teachers face numerous challenges, including limited resources, emotional demands, and the need to continuously adapt to the diverse needs of their students. Despite these difficulties, the participants demonstrated resilience, dedication, and a strong sense of purpose in their work.

The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on special education by providing an empirical and nuanced understanding of the realities of SPED teaching. The study extends existing discussions on emotional labor and burnout by illustrating how these experiences manifest in actual SPED settings. Furthermore, it reinforces the view that educating students with disabilities is a dynamic and relational process in which both teachers and students experience mutual growth. The participants' narratives also highlighted the significance of celebrating small achievements, practicing patience and consistency, fostering parental involvement, and finding personal fulfillment in the teaching profession.

The results underscore the importance of institutional support, professional development opportunities, and collaborative partnerships in enhancing the effectiveness and well-being of SPED teachers. By understanding their lived experiences, policymakers, school

administrators, and other stakeholders can develop strategies to improve working conditions, provide adequate resources, and create supportive environments that enable SPED teachers to perform their roles effectively. Ultimately, recognizing and addressing these challenges can contribute to a more inclusive, supportive, and enriching educational environment for both teachers and students.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was not supported by any external funding. The study was self-funded.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the Calayan Educational Foundation, Inc. (CEFI). The conduct of this study has been approved and given relevant clearances by the CEFI Research and Publication Office.

AI Declaration

The authors declare the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the authors used QuillBot to paraphrase certain ideas and as a reference for phrasing during the preparation of this work. The authors take full responsibility for ensuring proper review and editing of contents generated using AI.

ORCID

John Ellie E. Aguila – <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9432-8239>

References

- Alahmed, T. (2024). Burnout of special education teachers in Saudi Arabia's inclusive education schools. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, Article 1489820. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1489820>
- Alhassan, A. M., Solheim, K., Mellemssether, B., & Hall Christensen, M. (2025). Teachers' perspectives on supporting special needs in inclusive high schools. *Educational Research*, 67(4), 407–424. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2025.2557641>
- Alqahtani, A. A. (2025). Teachers' obstacles and supports in distance learning education for students who are deaf and hard of hearing in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 164, Article 105086. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2025.105086>
- Alsolami, A. S. (2022). Teachers of special education and assistive technology: Teachers' perceptions of knowledge, competencies and professional development. *SAGE Open*, 12(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221079900>
- Balading, J., Malicdem, J. A. M., Rayla, N. A. A., Ancheta, G. J. C., Alejandro, A., Blanco, J. A., Buenafior, N. B. R., Evangelista, C. B. S., Fulgencio, L. R., & Tus, J. (2023). Challenges faced by SPED teachers in balancing work and personal life. *Journal of Special Education Research*, 12(3), 45–58. <https://philarchive.org/archive/TUSTLE>
- Bani Odeh, K., & Lach, L. M. (2024). Barriers to, and facilitators of, education for children with disabilities worldwide: A descriptive review. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, Article 1294849. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1294849>
- Boerger, P. (2023). What Do Special Education Teachers Do? Three Responsibilities. Regis College. <https://www.regiscollege.edu/blog/education/what-does-a-special-educationteacher-do>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196>
- Byrd, D. R., & Alexander, M. (2020). Investigating special education teachers' knowledge and skills: Preparing general teacher preparation for professional development. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 4(2), 72-82. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.2020059790>
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: Complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 25(8), 652–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206>
- Cooc, N. (2019). Teaching students with special needs: International trends in school capacity and the need for teacher professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 83, 27–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.03.021>
- Custodio, A. B., & Nalipay, M. J. N. (2021). *Foundations of special and inclusive education*. Adriana Publishing Co., Inc. <https://tinyurl.com/4f88p8xu>
- Davis, P., & Florian, L. (2019). Reimagining special education: Why new approaches are needed. In L. Florian (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of special education* (2nd ed., pp. 9–22). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282236>
- Florian, L. (2019). On the necessary co-existence of special and inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23(7–8), 691–704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1622801>
- Fogle, K. C., Pua, D., & Wilt, B. (2024). Paraprofessional to teacher: Attracting and preparing special educators for a critical shortage. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 47(3), 242–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08884064241238450>

- Formoso, D. (2019). Supervision of instruction in special education in two schools in the Philippines. *Elixir Soc. Sci.*, 126, 52529-52533.
- Fundal, R. (2019). *History of special education in the Philippines*. Course Hero. <https://www.coursehero.com/file/57252404/History-of-SPED-in-the-Philpptx/>
- Garwood, J. D., Stark, K., Jones, B., & Thompson, N. H. (2026). Special education teacher burnout and the implementation of behavior intervention plans. *Teacher Education and Special Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00144029261432527>
- Guantia, M. E. C., & Motus, R. H. (2023). Lived experiences of special education teachers. *Industry and Academic Research Review*, 4(1), 392–398.
- Huscroft-D'Angelo, J., Farley, J., Hurley, K. D., Lambert, M., & Trout, A. (2022). Engaging parents in special education: An examination of knowledge and access to resources. *Exceptionality*, 30 (3), 201–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2021.2006060>
- Jeon, H. J., Diamond, L., & McCartney, C. (2021). Early childhood special education teachers' job burnout and psychological stress. *Early Education and Development*, 33(8), 1364–1382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2021.1965395>
- Kaden, U. (2020). COVID-19 school closure-related changes to the professional life of a K–12 teacher. *Education Sciences*, 10 (6), 165. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10060165>
- Kariou, A., Koutsimani, P., Montgomery, A., & Lainidi, O. (2021). Emotional labor and burnout among teachers: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(23), 12760. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182312760>
- Kilag, O. K., Uy, F. T., Dela Cerna, Y. T., Doroy, E. G., Gomez, H. M., Rivalal, A. D., & Castañares, J. A. (2024). Special education: Challenges faced by teachers in the Philippines. *International Multidisciplinary Journal of Research for Innovation, Sustainability, and Excellence (IMJRISE)*, 1(7), 92–98. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12614584>
- Kocaj, A. (2025). Relationships between the inclusion of students with special educational needs and their classmates' school outcomes: A replication study. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 83, Article 102426. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2025.102426>
- Matjeni, M., & de Jager, S. (2025). Cultivating special education teacher well-being: Nurturing connection in professional learning communities. *African Journal of Disability*, 14, Article 1547. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v14i0.1547>
- Miranda, J., Tolentino, J., & Danganan, C. (2023). Utilizing the Japanese Anime, 'Kotaro Lives Alone' to foster awareness of the concept of child abuse and neglect among Filipino pre-service teachers. *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, 14(2), 425-437.
- Mulyani, S., Salameh, A. A., Komariah, A., & others. (2021). Emotional regulation as a remedy for teacher burnout in special schools. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 655850. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.655850>
- Myrie, D. N., Dowd, N. T., & Latiker, M. D. (2024). Addressing the shortage of special education teachers of color: Implications for teacher education programs and K–12 systems. *Social Sciences*, 13(11), Article 622. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13110622>
- O'Malley, L., & Munsell, S. (2020). Photovoice: An innovative qualitative method in research and classroom teaching. *Rogers State University*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1250278.pdf>
- Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines. (2022). *Republic Act No. 11650: Instituting a policy of inclusion and services for learners with disabilities in support of inclusive*

- education. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2022/03mar/20220311-RA-11650.pdf>
- Reichman, N. E., Corman, H., & Noonan, K. (2008). Impact of child disability on the family. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 12(6), 679–683. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10995-007-0307-z>
- Rindang, A., Yeni, P., Fitriani, W., & Kiat, T. (2025). The communication ability with sign language by teachers towards the achievements of special needs children who are deaf. *Darussalam: Journal of Psychology and Educational*, 3(1), 29–37. <https://doi.org/10.70363/djpe.v3i1.206>
- Sanders, S., Rollins, L. H., & McFall, A. (2023). Aiming high: Applying goal setting to social and emotional learning skills in the elementary classroom. *Beyond Behavior*, 32(1), 4–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10742956221145692>
- Sankey, J. (2021). Navigating the Special Education System. *Commonwealth Learning Center*. <https://www.commlearn.com/navigating-the-special-education-system/>
- Scott, T. M., & Landrum, T. J. (2020). Positive reinforcement in schools: Logic and application. *Beyond Behavior*, 29(2), 124–130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1074295620934702>
- Stark, K., & Koslouski, J. B. (2020). The emotional job demands of special education: A qualitative study of alternatively certified novices' emotional induction. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 43(5), 403–420. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406420931497>
- Tedeschi, M. N., & Limeri, L. B. (2024). Models of disability as research frameworks in biology education research. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 23(3), Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.24-01-0026>
- Terry, C. (2020). What is a special education teacher? *Noodle*. <https://resources.noodle.com/articles/what-is-a-special-education-teacher/>
- Turi, A. (2020). A Brief History of Special Education. *medium.com*. <https://medium.com/@8860550abbas/a-brief-history-of-special-education-ff614260d361>
- Wabingga, R. J. (2025). SPED teachers: The stories of their struggles in the new normal education. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 3(5), 337–345. <https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2024.678>
- Walker, V. L., Douglas, K., Wang, C., & Li, Z. (2024). Special education teachers' perspectives of effective pre-service training practices in systematic instruction for students with extensive support needs. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 70(4), 582–593. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2022.2110362>
- Watson, S. (2019). What is special education? *ThoughtCo*. <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-special-education-3110961>
- White, J., McGarry, S., Williams, P. J., & Black, M. H. (2025). ‘We think differently, we learn differently, but at the end of the day we’re not that different’: Strengths-based approaches in high school from the perspectives of autistic adolescents. *Autism*, 29(11), 2804–2817. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613251348557>
- With, M. L. (2017). Are teachers increasingly leaving the profession? *Professions and Professionalism*, 7(2), Article e1723. <https://doi.org/10.7577/pp.1723>
- Zahid, N., Jamil, A., & Nawaz, I. (2023). Behavioral problems and academics of children in inclusive education – A cross-sectional survey. *Heliyon*, 9(2), Article e13496. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e13496>