

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION TEACHERS IN THE INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN MAINSTREAM CLASS

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Abstract

The study explored the lived experiences of special needs education teachers in the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classes at the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Laguna. Using a Husserlian Descriptive Phenomenological Approach, the study sought to explore the problems, strategies, and implications of inclusive education as perceived by eight special needs education teachers. In-depth interviews were conducted to collect data on themes such as different degrees of inclusion, the strategic importance of orientation and training, supportive environments and collaborative partnerships, behavioral and transitional dynamics, emotional impacts of inclusion, resource allocation, teacher resistance, parental concerns and misconceptions, individualized approaches and adaptive strategies, cooperation and assistance, effective communication and building rapport, specialized support services, comprehensive training and continuous professional development, and support and acceptance. The findings reflect a complex landscape in which teachers manage different degrees of inclusion, underlining the importance of intensive training and collaborative partnerships. Key topics include the importance of supporting the environment, managing behavioral problems, and the importance of effective communication. Teachers acknowledged substantial issues with resource allocation and acceptance of mainstreaming programs, emphasizing the significance of ongoing professional development and extensive training. The study discovered that inclusive education brings significant challenges and benefits teachers and students. The recommendations emphasize the importance of improving support services, developing policies, and conducting ongoing research to optimize inclusive practices. Based on these findings, the study suggests the SNED Model (Successful Network for Effective Development) for integrating children with special needs in the mainstream class. The SNED Model sought to provide a complete framework for successfully integrating children with special needs into mainstream education. This study contributes to the greater understanding of inclusive education by giving helpful perspectives for educators, policymakers, and others interested in building inclusive learning environments.

Keywords: Children with Special Needs, Inclusion, Lived Experiences, Mainstream Class, Special Needs Education Teacher.

1. Context and Rationale

The predecessor to this study establishes its context by exploring the important role of special needs education teachers in promoting the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classes. The study corresponds to the global pursuit of inclusive practices, which seek to provide equitable educational opportunities for all learners. Despite international and national policies supporting inclusion, such as Republic Act No. 11650 and DepEd Order No. 23 s., Implementing inclusive education in the Philippines remains complex and challenging in 2022, notably within Laguna's Schools Division Office (SDO).

The idea behind the research is based on an existing research gap in which the lived experiences of special needs education teachers, particularly in the Philippine context, have not been adequately investigated.

Previous research, such as that of Omoso and Vicente (2024), has highlighted the obstacles and opportunities of inclusive education, but it frequently overlooks the complex issues teachers encounter at the grassroots level. Benz et al. (2022) note that while educational approaches and innovations have evolved, the practical obstacles to mainstreaming children with special needs remain, especially in settings such as SDO Laguna.

Given the importance of understanding these problems, this research focuses on the lived experiences of special needs education teachers in SDO Laguna. It seeks to contribute to the conversation around inclusive education by offering a detailed analysis of the obstacles these instructors experience and presenting a framework or model to assist them in effectively resolving these difficulties. The findings are expected to guide policy development, professional development programs, and the establishment of support systems adapted to the specific needs of SDO Laguna's special needs education teachers.

1.1. Research Questions

This phenomenological study aimed to further understand the lived experiences of special needs education teachers in the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream class.

The objectives and assumptions of this study guide the following guidelines and questions. This study specifically sought to address the following issues:

- How do special needs education teachers at the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Laguna describe their experiences in the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classes?
- What themes are derived from the testimonies of the participants?
- What output can be recommended to include children with special needs in the mainstream classes successfully?

2. Research Methodology

A Husserlian descriptive phenomenological qualitative method was used to capture these teachers' lived experiences, to understand the substance of their experiences without external bias (Christensen, Welch, and Barr, 2017). This research's data analysis used thematic analysis to discover recurring patterns, themes, and meanings in the qualitative data collected from interviews with special needs education teachers at SDO Laguna.

2.1 Participants and/or other Sources of Data and Information

The study was conducted within the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Laguna, emphasizing special needs education teachers implementing mainstream programs. Eight (8) special needs education teachers were chosen by means of purposive sampling, guaranteeing a varied representation of individuals with practical knowledge of inclusive education in SDO Laguna. Some criteria were considered while selecting the participants, such as having at least three years of experience, possessing necessary special education credentials, and actively participating in mainstream programs. *Section headings*

2.2 Data Gathering Methods

The data-gathering procedure consisted of semi-structured interviews with the chosen participants. These interviews took place in a friendly and confidential setting, allowing participants to openly share their experiences, viewpoints, and issues connected to the adoption of inclusion policies. Each participant was interviewed through a Zoom meeting, audio-recorded, and accurately transcribed to ensure data accuracy and thoroughness during analysis. Ethical issues such as informed permission, confidentiality, and participant

anonymity were strictly followed throughout the data-gathering procedure to preserve participants' rights and well-being. First, all participants were provided informed consent, ensuring that they were completely aware of the study's aim, procedures, and potential hazards before deciding to participate. Participants were guaranteed that they could withdraw from the study at any moment with no repercussions. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained to protect participants' privacy and identities, with all data anonymized and securely kept preventing unauthorized access. Furthermore, the beneficence principle led the researcher to ensure that participants' well-being and dignity are always valued. This includes minimizing any potential inconvenience or distress caused by discussing sensitive topics and offering appropriate assistance and resources, such as referrals to counseling services if needed. Furthermore, the researcher became transparent and honest in all interactions with participants, colleagues, and stakeholders, cultivating a culture of trust and mutual respect. Finally, the research followed applicable ethical rules and regulations established by institutional review boards and professional organizations, ensuring participants' rights and welfare were protected throughout the research process. By putting ethical considerations first, this endeavor aimed to do research that is not just methodologically rigorous but also respectful, responsible, and socially accountable.

2.3 Data Analysis

For the analysis of data, Husserlian Descriptive phenomenology was used. Husserlian descriptive phenomenology takes an organized approach to analyzing lived experiences by emphasizing their key characteristics. The approach starts with intuition, in which the researcher interacts immediately with the phenomenon to understand its core. Next, bracketing was used to remove personal prejudices and prior preconceptions, allowing the phenomenon to be seen for what it is. Detailed accounts of experiences are then compiled using descriptive analysis. The researcher then reduces the experiences to their essences by finding invariant structures and meanings. Finally, synthesis entails merging these essences to express the essential nature of the phenomenon. This method seeks to reveal the pure essence of experienced events by systematically investigating how they manifest themselves (Christensen et al., 2017).

3. Discussion of Results

3.1 Problem 1. *How do special needs education teachers at the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Laguna describe their experiences in including children with special needs in mainstream classes?*

The lived experiences of (SNED) Teachers at SDO Laguna illustrate an intricate but rewarding journey of mainstreaming children with special needs. Teacher narratives emphasize topics such as various degrees of support from school administrators and the importance of ongoing professional development for general education teachers. Parental and community involvement are equally important considerations. SNED and general education teachers require support and collaboration, but this is sometimes addressed with resistance resulting from a lack of preparation. Parental involvement is essential, with some parents being supportive and others having reservations or unreasonable expectations. Teachers experience difficulties such as behavioural concerns but are extremely satisfied with their learner's success, including involvement in school events and academic improvement. Supporting inclusive education requires structural improvements, sufficient funding, and clear roles for general teachers. Teachers frequently experience personal and professional development, highlighting the necessity of involvement in creating a supportive atmosphere. Continuous professional development, institutional improvements, and ongoing representation are vital for the success of inclusive education efforts.

3.2 Problem 2. What themes are derived from the testimonies of the participants?

The study's findings were expressed in fourteen (14) themes gathered from interviews with special needs education teachers of SDO Laguna on their lived experiences on mainstreaming children with special needs. These are as follows: “Degrees of Inclusion”, “Strategic Importance of Orientation and Training”, “Supportive Environments and Collaborative Partnerships”, “Behavioral and Transitional Dynamics”, “Emotional Impacts of Inclusion”, “Resource Allocation”, “Teacher Resistance”, “Parental Concerns and Misconceptions”, “Individualized Approaches and Adaptive Strategies”, “Cooperation and Assistance”, “Effective Communication and Building Rapport”, “Specialized Support Services”, “Comprehensive Training and Continuous Professional Development”, and “Support and Acceptance”. These are the features of participants' accounts of their lived experiences in the implementation of the mainstream program.

3.3 Problem 3. What output can be recommended in delivering a successful inclusion of children with special needs in the mainstream classes?

Based on the gathered data, the researcher proposed the SNED (Successful Network for Effective Development) Model that will promote the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classes. It is divided into four key areas: Specialized Support Services, which provides therapies and counseling; Needs and Challenges, which addresses inclusion barriers such as behavioral dynamics and resource allocation; Environmental Support, which promotes supportive environments and collaboration; and Strategies and Development in Teaching, which focuses on individualized approaches and continuous professional development. Successful Mainstreaming is in the center, representing the culmination of these efforts to establish an inclusive, supportive educational environment.

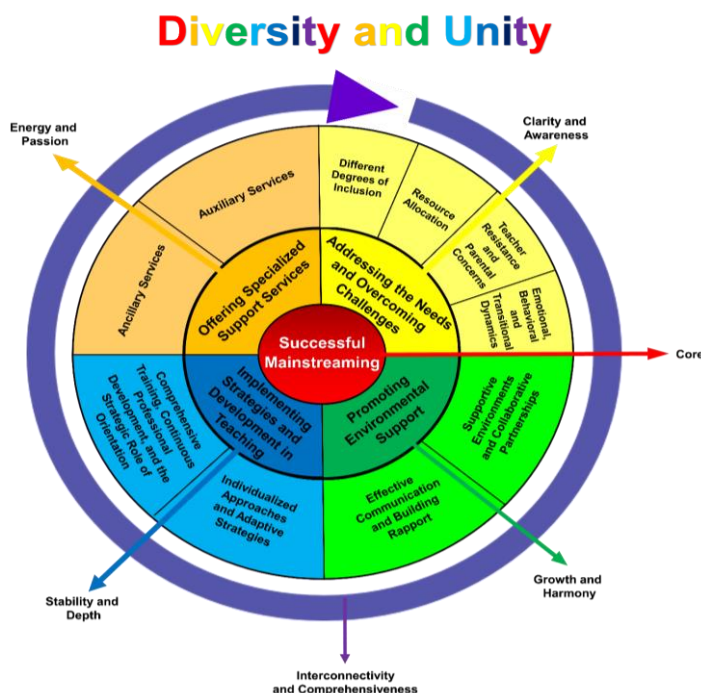


Figure 1. Bravanti's SNED (Successful Network for Effective Development) Model of Mainstreaming Children with Special Needs

Figure 1 The Bravanti's SNED Model, or Successful Network for Effective Development, is a comprehensive framework for successfully integrating children with special needs in mainstream classes. This model, which is based on a thematic analysis of participant responses, features the important components of inclusive education. The framework is symbolically depicted with rainbow colors to emphasize diversity and unity in mainstreaming initiatives. The approach is divided into four important key areas: Specialized Services (orange), Needs And Challenges (yellow), Environmental Support (green), and Strategies and Development in Teaching (blue). The arrow represents the interconnectivity and comprehensiveness of the four key areas in the success of mainstream programs. These elements merge to produce a comprehensive approach, with Successful Mainstreaming at its core (red).

Offering Specialized Support Services

Orange represents Specialized Support Services, expressing energy and passion, and reflecting the proactive and dynamic nature of the services offered. It includes components such as auxiliary services, which provide specialized assistance such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech therapy. These programs address the unique developmental and physical needs of children with special needs, enhancing their functional abilities and communication skills, which are essential for successful inclusion in mainstream classes. Ancillary services include Developmental Assessment and Counseling, which focuses on comprehensively evaluating children's developmental growth and providing emotional and psychological assistance. Developmental assessments contribute to the creation of individualized educational programs, whereas counselling promotes the emotional well-being of both kids and their families, providing a positive learning environment. These auxiliary and ancillary services form a strong support system for children with special needs, ensuring their holistic development and effective inclusion in mainstream settings.

Addressing the Needs and Overcoming Challenges

Yellow signifies clarity and awareness, emphasizing the recognition and understanding of the various needs and challenges in mainstreaming and how to overcome them. This section addresses the Different Degrees of Inclusion, which refers to the degree to which children with special needs are incorporated into mainstream classrooms. Behavioral and Transitional Dynamics are concerned with addressing behavioral disorders and ensuring smooth transitions between educational settings. The Emotional Impacts of Inclusion focuses on students' emotional well-being as they navigate inclusive environments. Resource Allocation ensures that appropriate resources are available to support inclusive practices, whereas Teacher Resistance addresses educators' reluctance and resistance to inclusive education. Finally, Parental Concerns and Misconceptions entail discussing and addressing parents' concerns and misconceptions about inclusion.

Promoting Environmental Support

Green represents growth and harmony, as well as the supporting atmosphere and approaches required for successful inclusion. Supportive Environments and Collaborative Partnerships are essential for fostering a positive learning environment through collaborations between educators, parents, and specialists. Cooperation and assistance encourage all stakeholders to work together to provide complete student support. Establishing clear and effective communication channels is essential for developing trust and rapport among kids, instructors, and parents. Support and Acceptance foster a culture of acceptance and support in the school community, making all children feel valued and included.

Implementing Strategies and Development in Teaching

Blue signifies stability and depth, demonstrating the ongoing development and strategic methods of education. Individualized Approaches and Adaptive Strategies include using tailored educational strategies to

satisfy learners' different needs. The Strategic Importance of Orientation and Training emphasizes the need for comprehensive orientation and training programs for educators to equip them with the essential skills and knowledge. Comprehensive Training and Continuous Professional growth ensure continual professional growth for teachers in inclusive education. These components are essential for developing an effective and supportive learning environment that can accommodate and foster children with special needs.

Symbolic Relationships of Colors

The colors used in the SNED Model show not just the diversity of the educational ecosystem but also the interdependence and interconnection of every aspect, essential for effective mainstreaming. Orange depicts the dynamic character of specialized support services, yellow highlights the need for clarity and comprehension of challenges, green represents a caring and loving environment, and blue represents the depth and consistency of instructional techniques. The color violet, a combination of all of these colors, embraces the subtopics of the four major areas, demonstrating the framework's comprehensiveness. The color red is at the centre, representing passion, energy, and the ultimate objective of successful mainstreaming, which is accomplished by the harmonic integration of all of these elements.

Overall, the SNED Model provides a solid foundation for understanding and implementing successful mainstreaming for children with special needs. This idea seeks to establish an inclusive educational setting where all children can thrive by addressing specialized services, identifying and overcoming problems, creating supportive surroundings, and continuously developing teaching practices. The symbolic use of rainbow hues emphasizes the diversity and unity required to achieve this aim, ensuring that each child's educational path is supported and valued.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

Educators encountered enormous challenges in achieving acceptance from both parents and fellow educators for children with special needs in mainstream classes. Misconceptions and insufficient training among educators are common causes of this opposition. Inadequate resource allocation, including funding, specialized equipment, and support personnel, significantly limits effective inclusive education. Schools struggle to secure the resources required to satisfy their students' different requirements. The study's findings illustrate a complex landscape of inclusive education, which is represented by fourteen major themes. These themes emphasize essential topics such as the need for tailored approaches, the strategic value of orientation and training, and the advantages of supportive settings and collaborative collaborations. Positive outcomes for children with special needs include improved socialization and academic progress, while challenges such as behavioral concerns, teacher resistance, and resource restrictions are balanced. The themes emphasize the importance of extensive support systems, efficient communication, and ongoing professional development. The proposed SNED Model will promote the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classes by benefiting every person involved. It provides teachers with significant professional development and training for efficiently managing varied expectations. Parents benefit from better communication and interaction, which strengthens their relationship with the school. Children with Special Needs benefit from individualized support and a supportive environment that fosters academic and social development. Better policy and resource allocation help administrators ensure long-term, effective inclusive practices. The SNED Model promotes a collaborative, resourceful, and inclusive learning environment for all.

4.2 Recommendations

The proposed Model is recommended to be utilized for a successful mainstream program for children with special needs. Provide thorough and mandatory training programs for teachers on inclusive practices, emphasizing collaboration with special education experts, developing empathy, and useful classroom

management techniques. It might consider allocating more funding and resources for inclusive education, such as specialized support services, assistive technologies, and additional personnel, to meet children's diverse needs in the mainstream class. Establish established avenues for communication and collaboration systems for teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to successfully meet student needs. They should have open communication to collaborate with each other and at least have a semi-annual mandatory meeting so that they are aware of the expectations for their children and, at the same time, are equipped with knowledge in handling and helping teachers in mainstream programs. Provide teachers with continuous professional development opportunities to help them comprehend inclusive education principles and improve their instructional techniques to suit the needs of diverse students. Engage parents, community members, and other stakeholders in conversations and projects that advance inclusive education, clear up myths, and create a welcoming atmosphere for all students.

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