Special Education Teachers in the New Normal: Their Experiences and Challenges in the Post-Pandemic Era

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the experiences and challenges of SPED teachers in the post-pandemic era in teaching Araling Panlipunan (Social Studies) among students with special needs in the Department of Education Division of Pampanga, Philippines for the school year 2023-2024 as the basis for implications.

KEYWORDS: inclusive education, special education, education blended learning, learning gaps, modular, Special Education, post-pandemic challenges, Special Education teachers, qualitative phenomenological research

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted education worldwide, with schools shutting down and online learning becoming the norm. Despite the challenges, some schools have reopened to get students back in the classroom, using hybrid methods. However, "pandemic learners" still struggle to keep up with grade-level abilities. The pandemic has disrupted regular education, special education, and psycho-educational procedures, relying more heavily on assessments to determine eligibility for special education and related services.

The pandemic has affected both teachers and students at all educational levels, with many falling behind academically, particularly in reading. The impact of online learning and the pandemic on academic skill deficits is debatable, and some teachers are concerned about the stigma associated with it. Students with disabilities in general education are not exempt from this problem, and they may be disproportionately at risk of losing skills.

The pandemic has also led to the overuse of existing special education assessment processes, causing problems and challenges in determining eligibility for special education services

Theoretical Background

This study was anchored on Jerome Bruner's (1966) Constructivist Theory, supported by Vygotsky's (2017) Scaffolding Theory, Charles Darwin's (1830) Adaptation Theory, Rutter's (1999) Resilience Theory, and Maslach et al.'s (2001) Burnout Theory. The Republic Act No. 7277 or the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities, the Republic Act 10533 or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, the Republic Act No. 11650 or the Inclusive Education Act, and the DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009 served as the legal bases of this study.

Constructivism Theory. This theory is a traditional learning paradigm used as a benchmark against the measurement of the learning processes. According to Jerome Bruner (as cited in Brugar & Whitlock, 2022), this theory states that learning is an active process of constructing knowledge instead of acquiring it. There is a need to transform education from a teacher-centered behavioristic model to a learner-centered

constructivist model by empowering educators to empower learners by employing modular learning in the teaching and learning process.

Scaffolding Theory. Another learning theory that is connected to this study is the "scaffolding" theory of Lev Vygotsky (as cited by Crocco & Livingston, 2022). In this method, a teacher, a more advanced student, or a guardian helps the learner to attain their learning goals (Crocco & Livingston, 2022).

In the current educational system, where face-to-face instruction is absent, parents and other family members face a big challenge in helping their children answer their modules. This is where Vygotsky's theory takes place. In contrast to independent learning, students learn through the collaborative efforts and guidance of family members. The parents and other family members "scaffold" the learning process to help the learner go beyond his or her learning boundaries.

Adaptation Theory of Charles Darwin (1830). The survival of the fittest is the common name for the principle of adaptation. An organism can adjust to a new environment gradually. The scientist who developed his theory was Charles Darwin, who conducted experiments on the Galapagos Islands in the 1830s.

Moreover, adaptation is the capacity to change in response to novel knowledge and encounters. In essence, learning is making adjustments to our ever-changing surroundings. We can learn new behaviors that help us deal with change through adaptation. Swiss psychologist and genetic epistemologist Jean Piaget identified four phases of learning in his theory of cognitive development in the 20th century. The ages at which each of these stages begins can vary, but they include sensorimotor (0 to 2 years old), preoperational (2 to 7 years old), concrete operational (7 to 12 years old), and formal operational (12 years old and up). Piaget's theory states that one of the key mechanisms directing cognitive development is adaptation. There are two ways that adaptation can happen on its own: assimilation and accommodation. Schemas are mental or cognitive structures created by prior experiences. Frederic Bartlett originally introduced the idea in 1932, and Piaget used the term in his theory of cognitive development.

Resilience theory of Rutter (1999). Resilience is defined by Rutter (1999) as a dynamic process including interactions between protective and risk variables. Events in life that have the potential to cause stress include poverty, family divorce, violent experiences, illness, unemployment, war, and natural catastrophes.

At some point in their academic and social lives, LSENs also encounter challenging circumstances. These could involve peer pressure and bullying, disputes with parents or teachers, rivalry or arguments with classmates, homework, exams, and class presentations, as well as switching from one school to another and, in this instance, switching from blended learning to in-person instruction. The ability to adjust effectively in the face of hardship or stress is known as resilience. It aids pupils in fending off any possible detrimental psychological impacts of trying situations. More than just pushing through hardships, resilient students see obstacles in their academic or social lives as opportunities for growth.

Burnout is frequently depicted as a three-dimensional structure. According to Maslach et al. (2001), these dimensions include depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and a sense of low personal success or lack of personal accomplishment. Feelings of persistent fatigue and unease are the result of exhaustion from these dimensions. A person experiences depersonalization when they become disinterested in and perceive their work as meaningless. A diminished sense of competence and success is a manifestation of a decline in the feeling of personal accomplishment or inability dimension. Because of this, burnout is considered a significant risk factor for many students and professionals, and it is said that burnout will eventually lead to depression. School burnout is thought to be a type of reaction that arises when students, particularly those in long-term school, are unable to cope with the stress of their studies. It is acknowledged in this context that school burnout has a three-dimensional structure as well. According to Luo et al. (2022), these dimensions include feeling inadequate at school, being exhausted at school, and becoming cynical about the purpose of the school. The state of affairs that these students find themselves in has detrimental effects on their development, particularly since low academic achievement, anxiety, depression, psychological issues, truancy, absenteeism, and school dropout are all associated with school burnout (Yang 2004, Bask and Salmela-Aro 2013). According to research, after the pandemic, LSENs experienced higher levels of school burnout than students in mainstream classes. This relates to the competencies that students must quickly pick up when switching to in-person instruction. Additionally, it was reported that male students attending these SPED schools experience higher levels of school burnout than female students (Salmela-Aro et al. 2022).

Literature Review

The research on distance learning and students with special needs is further restrained by the limited variability of students in these studies. In 2020, Vasquez and Straub reviewed the literature on online learning for special education students. Their review identified 43 studies on this topic. Of those studies, only six were identified as empirical. A deeper dive into the six empirical studies revealed that almost all students had an individualized education plan (IEP), and students in three of the six empirical studies participated in mainstream classrooms, suggesting that their developmental or behavioral limitations did not require more restrictive placements. When looking at the percentage of students with special needs enrolled in distance schools, diagnoses that often represent students with severe challenging behaviors and significant developmental delays represented a tiny portion of those enrolled. For example, Carnahan and Fulton (2022) investigated distance schools in Pennsylvania. Of the 2,600 students with special needs enrolled in distance learning schools, the majority of the students were classified as having a learning disability. Less than 10% were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or intellectual disability (ID), highlighting the need for research specifically looking at those individuals who are more severely impacted.

Developmental disabilities encompass a broad range of conditions that result from cognitive and/or physical impairments and range in degree of severity (May Institute, 2020). Seventeen percent of individuals aged 3-17 years old are diagnosed with a developmental disorder, the most common of which are ID, cerebral palsy, and ASD. Further, Petek (2022) outlined requirements set forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and reported that both ASD and ID are considered relatively severe disabilities. In addition to exhibiting delays in development, many of these individuals also demonstrate challenging behavior. Research suggests that approximately 64%-93% of individuals with ASD exhibit one or more challenging behaviors (McTiernan et al., 2022), and 10%-20% of individuals with ID demonstrate challenging behaviors (Jacobson, 2022; Kiernan & Kiernan, 2022). These students are often educated with support and services beyond what is offered in general education classrooms and, at times, in different classrooms. In California, 12% of students in K-12 schools are in special education classrooms on a comprehensive campus, and 3% are in separate schools away from their school or district of residence (Petek, 2022). For this 3% of students who are most impacted and unable to be educated at their school of residence, research on distance learning outcomes is exceptionally scarce. The researchers from the present study could not find any articles that specifically looked at distance learning in non-public schools (NPSs), let alone distance learning studies in an NPS during an international emergency.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding health crisis initiated an unprecedented and rapid move to distance learning platforms. Educators, students, and their families have been in uncharted waters almost overnight. The need for more research on distance learning and students with special needs, especially students with severe developmental disabilities and high behavioral needs, is quite apparent

Data Analysis

Data Gathering Stage. To concretize the data collected from the research survey questionnaires, the researcher also used other instruments, like interviews, to supplement, clarify, and provide factual background for each of the respondents based on the profile gathered.

Post-Data Gathering Stage. The researcher used a model to analyze data [adapted from Nicdao, 2015]. Data collection and analysis were conducted separately. After the questionnaires were answered, the responses were transcribed. The data obtained from the questionnaires were coded and analyzed for the themes.

The steps in qualitative analysis include: (1) preliminary exploration of data by reading through the transcripts; (2) coding of the data by segmenting and labeling the text; (3) using codes to develop themes by aggregating similar codes together; and (4) connecting and interrelating themes.

Conclusions

Another important finding in the study is that the teachers' ability to work one-on-one with learners is outstanding. However, the class size must be manageable to make this strategy effective. While it is taxing for the teachers to craft individual plans based on the needs of their learners, they still did everything to gear them up for success. They spent a rigorous time in analyzing what each individual learner needed so that they could cater to these learners.

Moreover, it was also found out that collaboration among teachers is important in achieving the goals of inclusion. When they share ideas and strategies in meeting the specific needs of learners, they come up with more effective methods.

The following are the identified pros and cons of including special education learners in genera education classes. The advantages are: (1) Friendships are formed among different kinds of learners; (2) Students in the inclusion classrooms meet their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals better; (3) High expectations are established because learners are challenged with new, innovative opportunities; (4) Such practice promotes teaching staff collaboration; and (5) Parents are more encouraged to participate in their children's learning. The disadvantages, on the other hand, are: (1) There is insufficient funds in buying resources for inclusive classrooms; (2) Other SPED students' learning is disrupted because they learn in ways similar to those in regular classes; (3) Some disabilities require special classroom configuration, which is not possible in inclusive classrooms; (4) The process of integrating SPED in regular classes requires a long period of time for it to show effectiveness; and (5) There may be cases of bullying if SPED students will be mixed with regular students.

ased on the findings of the study, a conclusion is drawn.

The Sped teachers in the Division of Pampanga faced diverse challenges, ranging from adapting to different changes in the educational setup and teaching strategies to navigating ways to remediate the gaps in academic skills of LSENs after the pandemic. With the various strategies employed in teaching, including utilizing innovative tools and adjusting emotionally and socially to integrate into the post-pandemic educational system, they overcame these challenges by initiating changes highlighting the importance of differentiated instruction in creating a supportive educational environment that values every learner from diverse backgrounds.

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