



Teachers' Experiences in Handling Students with Learning Difficulty

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Abstract: The world's educational system has evolved over time. These changes include the growing awareness in the special education context. Thus, an increasing number of students with special needs — both formally assessed and assumed— are observed in either private or public schools. This results in the growing population of students with special needs, particularly students with learning disability. Implicitly, nationwide school divisions are experiencing the same dilemma which include the Tacloban City Division, Philippines. Hence, this study is conducted to explore the experiences of teachers handling students with learning difficulty. This study made use of qualitative data. This study is based on the Heiderger's Phenomenological design and Collaizzi's method of data analysis. There were ten (10) teachers from grades 5 and 6 who actively participated in this study. Thus they represent the five (5) District Learning Centers under the Tacloban City Division. The data was collected through a one-on-one interview with the participants, a checklist was also utilized during classroom observations and focus-group discussion. Results revealed that teachers experiences are challenging and not easy. Results also shows the teachers' best practices, challenges and coping mechanisms as highlights of their experiences.

Keywords: *Special education, experiences, learning difficulty*

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INTRODUCTION

This research looks into the experiences of teachers who handle students with learning difficulty. Globally as stated in the review done by (Rosenberg & Foshay, 2002), many schools are not performing as they should, and there is evidence of institutional lethargy. There are many factors affecting the drop in performance levels in schools such as dedicated, knowledgeable, well-trained and credentialed teachers are becoming rare commodities. This is prevalent in historically high-need and specialized areas such as math, science, and special education.

This is evident in the Philippine context where there is a growing number of students and the insufficient number of teachers as reported in 2010. The Department of Education follows certain procedures in hiring teachers. There are qualifications set that an applicant must possess in order to qualify for a teaching job. However, a different set of qualifications are required for teachers applying for special education teacher. Ironically, in reality, there are only a few existing special education schools and special education classes within a central or regular school. Consequently, due to the lack of formal assessments, there are students who require special education services present in the regular class (Malrouu, 2017). Often, these cases of students with learning difficulties are placed in the regular class. These are the students who are usually referred to as the slow learners, stubborn and difficult to manage. Hence, these students are commonly placed in the last sections.

Learning difficulty is often not given the priority due to the lack of assessment tools. It is now the challenge of the teacher how he/she would be able to make his/her student learn. Considering the teacher's profile which includes

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baccalaureate degree, years of experience and relevant training and seminars in education, these are indicators that he/she is, even more, qualify for a regular class mainstreamed with students — who, unfortunately — were not properly assessed and are considered to have a learning difficulty.

In the case of Tacloban City Division, there are only very few public schools who cater special education cases. It can be inferred that these schools in Tacloban City Division accept cases of evident physical and intellectual disabilities such as hearing impairment and visual impairment as well as presumed cases of giftedness which is often referred as fast learners. Cases of students with learning difficulties are left in the regular class and are usually placed in the last sections.

Objective of the Study

This research aims to help expand the landscape of knowledge related to the individual experiences of teachers dealing with students having a learning difficulty. This study provides a gateway to explore, describe and document the precious experiences which shows the best practices, challenges and coping mechanisms of teachers handling students with learning difficulty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

High Attrition Among Special Education Teachers

Teaching entails loads of paperwork in the actual world of a teacher. In the Philippine context, teachers cannot do away with the demands of paperworks which are due and to be submitted to the Department of Education almost quarterly. It is highly observable that Filipino teachers have tons of work to do inside and outside of the classroom, however, for most of them, they are being underpaid. Thus, many would prefer to quit their jobs and look for greener pastures outside teaching.

Many studies that have been published relative to high attrition rate on the number of special education teachers have pointed burnout as the main cause, (Nuri & Uzunboylu, 2017). The working hours of the teachers have been statistically significant for the sufficiency in the engagement of student sub-dimension. However, it was found out that teacher with fewer working hours had lower self-efficacy score than the teachers with more working hours. Comparatively, a study conducted by Emery and Vandenberg (2010) of special educators who were considering leaving their field mentioned student caseloads and a broad range of disabilities within their caseloads are contributing factors why teachers quit their jobs. The paperwork and regulatory issues are also related to the attrition rate of special educators.

Burnout may occur to few teachers who are even committed to their personal and academic growth of students. It is when teachers feel laden by the demands of their work as well as the thought that the challenges in their work environment impede their ability to accomplish their professional goals, (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). This has been an outgrowing problem in the US for over two decades now. The need for trained special education teachers is rapidly increasing due to the increasing number of children being diagnosed each year. It is a continued problem not only in the US but as well as here in the Philippines.

Another study was conducted and published by (Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011; Niamhom, Srisuantang, & Tanpichai, 2018), where they have found out consistent results that special education teachers are more likely to exit profession at higher rates than general education teachers. Similar contributing factors mentioned in the earlier studies, such as paperwork, additional record keeping, the dearth of specialized behavior management skills, as well as lack of thorough knowledge of content areas directly affects high-risk of leaving their posts. Most often than not, a novice special education teacher struggles in the early years of being exposed in the real special education field which may have influenced the decreasing number of teachers in the special education field (Brownell, Hirsch, & Seo, 2004). Researchers have found that novice special education teachers sought for the guidance of the experienced special education teachers to develop their skills. Beginning teachers also felt they were expected to perform various roles, have a wide range of expertise and often serve students across grade levels and disability groups. Furthermore, novice teachers have a wide range of knowledge about curriculum and interventions than general educators. Consequently, these expectations, along with that of providing direct instructions while coordinating efforts professionals and parents create the need for instruction programs that will suit the needs of special education teachers particularly the beginners.

For the purpose of this review, the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education or also known as SPeNSE was used to describe special education teacher shortages and attrition. This investigates the supply of qualified teachers and related service providers available to youth disabilities during the school year 2000 (Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, &

Willig, 2002). Moreover, in the study of Billingsley (2002), he used the SPeNSE data to report the characteristics and qualifications of beginning special education teachers those with fewer than three years of teaching experience. In terms of preparedness, newer teachers rated themselves lower on overall job performance compared with teachers with three or more years of experience in the field (Billingsley, 2002).

Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences

According to Andrews and Brown (2015), there are several studies on general education teachers' perceptions and experiences compared to the number of studies or literature on comparing special education teachers' ideal views on their teaching experiences. Andrews and Brown then conducted a study on this topic which aimed to examine how special education teachers' ideal perceptions on their current experiences with parents, administrative and colleague support, classroom management, student success, resources, workload, and assessment (Yahya, Ismail, Salleh, & Abdullah, 2015). Its results showed that special education teachers have higher perceived self-efficacy and satisfaction in areas they have greater control such as the classroom compared to externally assigned pressures such as loads and paperwork.

The same study was conducted by Gavish, Bar-On, et al. (2016), where they examined Israelis' perceived self-efficacy. The demanding work of a special education teacher such as providing educational services to students with or without special needs, guide general education teachers in developing activities and take part in the regular teaching tasks, effective handling of these multitude duties require a strong sense of self-efficacy. The results have indicated a high percentage of respondents with strongly perceived self-efficacy. Teachers tend to have a high or strong perceived self-efficacy based on their high control over their ability to cooperate with faculty members and parents, as well as in the planning and carrying out of complex teaching process in a variety of situations necessitating teachers to possess a wide range of skills and innovative knowledge.

Looking at the teachers' perception, the phenomenological study conducted by (S. M. Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009) examined the experiences of fifteen special education teachers in a rural district in North Carolina. S. M. Sheridan et al. (2009) found out that special education teachers did not value themselves as esteemed employees. The teachers in this study described the lack of support from general education, administration, and parents. S. M. Sheridan et al. (2009) also pointed out the amount of stress that special education teachers experienced undergoing the process and suggested a need to examine the stress the students faced as well.

A follow-up study on the teachers' perceptions was also conducted by (Berkeley, Bender, Gregg Peaster, & Saunders, 2009). Berkeley et al. (2009) led a study in which perceptions of four special education teachers were examined. This study pointed out the frustrations that were felt over lack of information and guidance provided by the principal, school districts, and other concerned authorities.

These studies implied the teachers felt the need for school authorities to provide training and support for special education teachers. Additionally, S. M. Sheridan et al. (2009) study, however, took a deeper look at how special education teachers felt their collegiate training prepared them for their professions. The results were that insufficient preparation led to high attrition rates in the field of special education. While, the teachers on these studies did not disagree with the need for qualified teachers, yet, they expressed the lack of support in preparation for becoming high qualified special education teachers based on standards.

Self-efficacy issues and preparations highly matter in the success of the teachers in the classroom. These studies show that teachers' perceptions and self-efficacy influence performance in delivering services to students. Teachers show greater confidence over aspects they have greater control and become more effective and efficient when given the ample and appropriate support.

The preceding literature and studies cited are relative to this research since they describe the basis as to why this study must be undertaken in the Tacloban City Division. The following are done globally and locally where it best characterized the teachers' experiences, as well as causes why teachers in the city leave their jobs, teachers' qualifications and their perceptions in teaching students with special needs, particularly students with learning difficulty. These data served as foundations and support in the researcher's aim to explore the teachers' experiences, identify teachers' best practices, challenges and coping mechanisms. Furthermore, these data aided on building connections on the missing gaps through creating relevant proposals.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study makes use of qualitative instruments through descriptive phenomenological design based on Heidegger's philosophical approach and Colaizzi's method of data analysis which allows the researcher to gain a rich and deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the teachers handling students with learning difficulty. The underlying principle of Heidegger's philosophy is that there are various ways of experiencing, interpreting and putting meaning on a certain phenomenon. Heidegger made use of the hermeneutics as a research method founded on the ontological view that the lived experience is an interpretive process. The descriptive phenomenology is a valuable methodical tool for focusing on research questions to investigate and enlighten about a certain phenomenon by providing descriptions in rich detail and revealing meanings of the said phenomenon (O'Brien in (Kornhaber, 2009)).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' Experiences in Terms of Best Practices, Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

In line with the Colaizzi's method, the highlights of teachers' experiences are presented through the following emergent themes carefully analyzed from the transcriptions taken. Themes are presented in a thematic form where it is categorized in three such as best practices, challenges, and coping mechanisms.

Best Practices

Table 1 presents specific ways that teachers of the Tacloban City Division apply. These are considered as their best practices since it is found to have positive outcomes to their students with learning difficulty.

Table 1 *Best Practices Applied by the Teachers of the Tacloban City Division Handling Students with Learning Difficulty*

Best Practices	Its Importance
Teachers create a positive environment towards helping students with learning difficulties through;	
(a) peer tutoring	Peer tutoring is a flexible, peer mediated strategy that involves students serving as academic tutors or tutees. A higher performing students are paired with lower performing student to review critical academic or behavioral concepts.
(b) verbal encouragement	Teachers make simple gestures of encouragement which boost students' morale. Students with learning difficulty are encouraged to attend classes regularly despite their struggle inside the classroom.
(c) designing activities for students with learning difficulty	Students with learning difficulty are given at chance to excel in different areas such as in music, dance and arts.
(d) giving the students the leeway to choose which activity they like	This refers to giving the students the chance to choose activities that catch best their interest.
(e) giving students with learning difficulty some personal time	Personal time refers to the time given to students with learning disabilities when they have the chance to do whatever they like provided that they will not cause any harm to other students. This is usually done before the class starts. This activity positively drains students' energy. During the class, students are observed to be seated well in their seats and pays good attention to the teacher, which helps the teachers to manage the class easily.
(f) assigning students with learning difficulty to a certain task	Students feel satisfied and accomplished when teachers assign them to specific tasks. This also means to them that teachers are giving them attention and that they can be trusted.
(g) accommodating the needs of students with learning difficulty by modifying a given task or activity	Students with learning difficulty are observed to be more participative when they are able to finish activities based on their ability.

Teachers create a positive environment towards helping students with learning difficulties In this study, best practices refer to explicit ways that the teachers employed in order to make students with learning difficulty functional or learn inside the regular classroom. The above mentioned best practices are the most frequent and common utterances of the teachers who were interviewed. Its importance is also based on their given descriptions. Some of those practices are self-learned and others are shared with other colleagues. These practices may apply to some cases such as in this study but not to all.

The following implies that teachers in the Tacloban City Division express decent concern towards their students with learning difficulty by doing such. Despite the challenges, teachers in the Tacloban City Division remain positive and show fervent willingness to help students with learning difficulties. Teachers are in the full reign of their classroom strategies. Hence, they feel more confident and effective in areas where they have greater control (Andrews & Brown, 2015).

These teachers have always aimed to give students with learning difficulties the extra mile and address their needs. And by making simple gestures of encouragement, it boosts the morale of students with learning difficulty. According to the teachers interviewed, attention seeking is the most common issue present in the classroom almost everyday. Hence, they mend this situation by assuring students with learning difficulty that they are given the needed special attention and sense of belongingness.

Employment of varied classroom strategies help address student diversity as well as accommodate the needs of students with learning difficulty. Students with learning difficulties are given a chance to excel in different areas like in music, dance or arts. These are the common areas where students with learning difficulty can show off their hidden talents and skill. Teachers give them the opportunity to develop students' confidence further. This also influences students perceptions towards education, that having learning difficulty is not a hindrance to pursue and have a better life in the future.

These strategies are found effective in dealing with students with learning difficulties. These includes the giving of students the leeway to choose which activity they like to work on. This means that students with learning difficulty get the chance to do the activity that best interest them or activities that are based on their abilities. This gives them confidence and accomplishment which further results for students to be more participative in the class.

Peer tutoring also works for students with learning difficulty. Students with learning difficulty feel more comfortable and at ease when helped by their peers. Furthermore, some teachers would religiously conduct remedial instructions after class hours. A clearly defined rules in the classroom have always proven its effectiveness in managing the class, thus, allowing students to have time to do whatever they want before class is an active way of eliciting desired behaviors. And it has been a great help for general education teachers seeking help from the special education teachers in surviving the challenges in dealing with students with learning difficulties.

Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

Negative attitudes towards school tasks: It is a consistent grouch of teachers about the tons of paperwork theyre dealing with everyday which results in lesser contact with students particularly in addressing the needs of students with learning difficulties. This implies that the teachers' current experiences pertain to the state of being burnout as mentioned in many studies (Nuri & Uzunboyulu, 2017). Many studies have proved that paperworks and varied regulatory issues are related to the attrition rate of teachers both the in the regular and special education context.

They constantly mention redoing tasks such as lesson planning even if there are already available ready-made-lesson plans to guide them. It is absurd to some teachers why do they have to redo what they already have. Due to this mountain of paperwork to do, teachers are not able to keep track with their lessons based on the curriculum guide. Hence, they have to move from one topic to the next without achieving mastery. Surprisingly, one teacher even admitted that they have to produce pretentious reports to be submitted to the Division office.

Adverse effects of school's activities and other demands on students with learning difficulty: As mentioned above, teachers can no longer give emphasize on the academic needs of the students, particularly the students with learning difficulty because of the paperworks, school's monthly activities and other demands from the heads and Division Office which gives worsening effects on the condition of the students with learning difficulty. Globally, teacher express concerns about the effects of high workloads, stress and poor working environments on job satisfaction and teaching effectiveness. This was according to the journal on Teachers Matters published 2005, it implies that overlapping of school activities and needed requirements from teachers negatively affects the students' performance. Teachers

can no longer do an extra mile in helping students such as doing remedial instructions. Hence students' welfare is compromised due to the overlapping schedules of activities.

Table 2 *Best Practices Applied by the Teachers of the Tacloban City Division Handling Students with Learning Difficulty*

Challenges	Coping Mechanisms
The negative attitude towards school tasks:	
(a) Numerous paperwork and deadlines to meet.	Keeping "to-do list" and noting important dates. Giving classroom activities so that teachers can work on with the paperwork.
(b) Rewriting lesson plan even with the availability of the ready-made-lesson plan.	Making adjustments with the level of difficulty in the given activities found in the plan.
(c) Difficulty reaching mastery level due to lack of time and keeping on track with the curriculum guide.	Relying on the backwash effect. It is when the teachers mirror the test because they want their students to pass.
Adverse effects of the school's activities and other demands on students with learning difficulty:	
(d) Insufficient time to attend to the needs of the students.	Choosing the most relevant topic to teach to students with learning difficulty.
(e) Inability to conduct remedial instructions for students with learning difficulty due to time constraints.	Peer tutoring.
(f) Overlapping monthly activities and ancillary works.	Scheduling of activities based on the most to least important ones. Giving classroom activities for students. Not attending classes.
Teachers demands for parents and administrative support:	
(g) Difficulty reaching out to parents	Home visitation is done quarterly. Sometimes schedule of visitation depends on the need to do so.
(h) Lack of resource materials and school facilities	Utilizing what is ready and available materials and facilities Using internet sources.
(i) Lack of trainings in teaching students with learning difficulty	seeking help from other colleagues, from superiors or SPED teachers in other schools.

Teaching has been the noblest profession as well as the most challenging kind of job. A teacher has to perform various roles all at the same time. And with the given scenarios above, being a teacher comes with many responsibilities. However, these tasks and responsibilities are somehow not teacher friendly. According to a journal called "Teachers Matter" published on 2005, the teachers are now expected to have much broader roles, taking into account the individual development of the students, the management of learning process in the classroom, the development of the entire school as a learning community and connections with the local to global worlds. The journal also added that there are concerns about the image and status of teaching and teachers often feel that their work is underestimated. Hence, teacher's relative salaries are declining in most countries.

Nowadays, aside from the demanding requirements of paperwork, teachers find it a real challenge to let students master specific skills particularly in reading and numeracy. Poor academic performance of students even in the intermediate levels is for them an indication of students with learning difficulties. And often, general education teachers will question their ability to cope with the challenges. They are determined. However, they are being hindered because of the lack of time and support in terms of resources and facilities such as appropriate books, internet connection as well as seminars and trainings on how to deal with students with learning difficulties.

Teachers' demands for parents and administrative support: S. Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg, and Vuorinen (2011) found that based on his study, some teachers consider themselves undervalued. Due to loads of paperwork and

other activities required of them, teachers suggests that they may be given clerks or secretaries to work and focus on paperworks. While them, will give their full attention and time to the students. Otherwise, they appeal to lessen the number of hours and subjects spent in the basic education. Teachers also cry for a salary increase to compensate their ancillary works as well as help them improve their professional development and awareness through conducting of seminars and trainings. Effective professional development of teachers begins with the understanding of teacher's needs and their work environments (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). Teachers need a wide array of ongoing opportunities to improve their skills. However, their trainings are even neglected due to limited financial resources.

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