

Article

**EXPLORING THE PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY
TEACHERS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AND INCLUSIVE SETTINGS**

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Abstract

This study delves into the multifaceted challenges encountered by teachers in special education and inclusive settings, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. Through a detailed analysis of demographic profiles, professional challenges, collaboration dynamics, and administrative responsibilities, this research sheds light on the intricate landscape of educators' roles. The findings underscore the significant commitment and adaptability required by teachers to cater to individualized student needs, manage administrative demands, and foster effective collaboration with colleagues and parents. While demographic variables were examined, the absence of statistically significant relationships with the degree of professional challenges highlights the complex nature of these difficulties. This study not only contributes to the literature on inclusive education but also offers valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to improve support systems and strategies for teachers in special education, ultimately fostering more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Keywords: Special education, inclusive settings, professional challenges



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Introduction

In the realm of education, the pursuit of equality and inclusivity has always been at the forefront, with the fundamental right to education extending to every individual, regardless of their abilities or disabilities (Megret, 2017; Varsik, 2022). This principle has led to the emergence of special education as a critical field aimed at providing tailored

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instruction to learners with unique learning requirements (DeMatthews et al., 2020). According to Badilla-Quintana et al. (2020) within this context, special education teachers play a pivotal role in ensuring that students with special educational needs (SENs) receive an education that not only addresses their individualized learning needs but also empowers them to thrive in an inclusive environment. Tohara (2021) and Gandolfi et al. (2021) ensuring quality education for learners with special needs is the vital role of special education teachers. In the Philippines, these educators encounter various difficulties that hinder their ability to provide effective instruction tailored to each student's unique requirements (Guevarra, 2020; Minkos & Gelbar). Challenges arise from factors like inadequate training, resource scarcity, heavy workloads, budget constraints, behavior management issues, emotional exhaustion, and insufficient administrative support. Special education teachers in the Philippines have voiced concerns about limited resources and inadequate attention from school administrations regarding matters like acquiring suitable assistive technology and enhancing the skills of special education teachers. Research by Almario and Ocampo (2014) uncovered challenges linked to insufficient training, resource scarcity, and high workloads. Similarly, Pascual's study in 2016 underscored the necessity for more extensive training programs and sufficient resources for teachers handling learners with special needs.

Excessive caseloads hinder both special education and regular teachers from providing individualized attention, leading to frustration and learning stagnation (Stewart, 2023). Specialized training is essential to address the diverse needs of learners with special needs effectively. However, many Filipino teachers lack adequate training due to insufficient funding. Special education and inclusive education programs require extra resources and specialized materials, but they often suffer from inadequate funding, resulting in insufficient resources for teachers. Additionally, a lack of administrative support obstructs teachers from delivering resource room services and personalized education.

These challenges negatively impact both teachers and students. Burnout and lack of support may drive teachers to leave the profession or seek opportunities abroad, causing high turnover rates and a shortage of qualified special education teachers. Consequently, the quality of education received by learners with special needs suffers. When teachers lack proper training and resources, they struggle to provide personalized attention, leading to behavioral problems and limited learning progress.

Although existing research highlights the challenges faced by special education and regular teachers in the Philippines, gaps still exist

in understanding these educators' experiences within special education and inclusive settings. Further, evidence-based solutions are required to tackle these challenges and support teachers effectively.

It is essential to conduct a study that explores the difficulties encountered by special education teachers in providing for the needs of their learners within special education and inclusive settings in the Philippines. Teachers play a pivotal role in offering quality education to learners with autism spectrum disorders, hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, specific learning disabilities, and more, enabling them to reach their full potential. Addressing these challenges through evidence-based solutions is vital to support educators and ensure comprehensive education for all learners with special needs.

This study can inform policymakers and stakeholders about the professional and systemic challenges faced by special education teachers in the Philippines. The results can guide the development of intervention plans that enhance inclusivity within the education system. Identifying research gaps and highlighting local issues that need addressing, this study can provide a better grasp of the challenges encountered by special education and regular teachers in the Philippines. Such an analysis can pave the way for targeted interventions and support systems, alleviating the challenges faced by these educators and ultimately enhancing the quality of education for learners with special needs across the country.

Professional and Systemic Challenges

Research on the professional and systemic challenges faced by teachers in special education and inclusive settings underscores the intricate landscape of educating diverse learners. Teachers in these contexts grapple with multifaceted hurdles, from adapting curriculum materials to suit individualized learning needs to fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, including parents, support staff, and general education teachers (Efthymiou, 2023; Mkwanaazi, 2023).

The need to implement differentiated instruction, address behavioral concerns, and manage classroom dynamics while adhering to inclusive principles further accentuates the complexity of their roles (Pazey & Combes, 2020). Furthermore, systemic challenges, such as limited resources, inadequate training, and gaps in policy implementation, compound these issues, potentially impacting teachers' job satisfaction, well-being, and retention rates (Munger et al., 2023). As educators strive to cultivate inclusive and equitable learning environments, understanding and addressing these challenges becomes paramount

for promoting effective pedagogy and ultimately ensuring positive academic and social outcomes for all students (Addy et al., 2023).

The intricate challenges encountered by teachers in special education and inclusive settings reflect the dynamic nature of education for diverse learners. Navigating the demands of individualized instruction, collaboration, and adherence to inclusive principles presents a multifaceted landscape for educators. The additional systemic obstacles of resource constraints, inadequate training, and policy gaps further underscore the complexity of their roles. Acknowledging and addressing these challenges is essential, not only for enhancing the professional experiences and well-being of teachers but also for fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments that foster positive outcomes for all students.

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey method to collect data, aiming to describe and analyze characteristics related to special education teachers' challenges in a specific school division during the 2022-2023 academic year. The target population comprised special education and receiving teachers within this division.

The questionnaire assessed systemic challenges like resource adequacy, professional development opportunities, and caseload burdens. The descriptive survey method was chosen due to its suitability for describing characteristics of a population or phenomenon, offering a structured approach to reliable and valid data collection through closed-ended questions that facilitate efficient data analysis.

The study took place in Minglanilla District, Cebu, Philippines, with a population of 132,135 and 26,620 households. A total of thirty-four (34) special education and receiving teacher-respondents were included from three educational institutions: Lipata Sped Center, Lipata National High School Sped Center, and Tungkop Elementary School Sped Class. To enhance questionnaire reliability and validity, the researchers adapted tools from established studies.

The first part gathered participants' profile information, such as age, gender, civil status, educational background, teaching experience, training attended, class size, and student disabilities/special needs. For the second part, the "Special Education Teacher Challenges Survey" developed by Tournaki, Sultana, and Bora (2018) was modified to assess professional challenges faced by special education teachers. This tool had previously demonstrated good reliability and validity in a similar study conducted in the United States.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Profile

	Frequency	Percentage
Age (in years)		
51 – 60	2	13.33
46 – 50	1	6.67
41 – 45	1	6.67
36 – 40	2	13.33
31 – 35	7	46.67
26 – 30	2	13.33
Mean: 4.13		
StDev: 1.64		
Gender		
Male	3	20.00
Female	12	80.00
Civil Status		
Married	10	66.67
Single	5	33.33
Highest Educational Attainment		
College Graduate	3	20.00
Master Level	10	66.67
Doctoral Level	2	13.33

The provided data highlights the demographic characteristics of participants in the study. The age distribution of participants reveals a diverse range, with the majority falling between the ages of 31 and 35 (46.67%), followed by participants aged 51 to 60 (13.33%). The distribution indicates a relatively balanced representation of age groups. In terms of gender, the sample predominantly comprises females (80%), with males accounting for 20% of the participants. In relation to civil status, the data shows that a larger proportion of participants are married (66.67%) compared to single individuals (33.33%).

Moving on to the highest educational attainment, the majority of participants hold a Master's degree (66.67%), showcasing a high level of educational accomplishment. College graduates constitute 20% of the sample, while those with a Doctoral degree comprise 13.33% of the participants. These results suggest a well-educated cohort of participants in the study. The mean age of 4.13 with a standard deviation of 1.64 indicates a relatively clustered age distribution, further emphasizing the diversity of the sample. In summary, the study's participants represent a diverse group in terms of age, gender, civil status, and educational attainment. The relatively high proportion of individuals with Master's degrees and the wide age range of participants contribute to the richness of the data, potentially providing valuable insights into the professional and systemic challenges faced by

teachers in special education and inclusive settings across various demographics.

Table 2. Profile

	Frequency	Percentage
Years of Teaching		
31 and above	1	6.67
21 – 25	1	6.67
16 – 20	1	6.67
11 – 15	3	20.00
6 – 10	8	53.33
5 and below	1	6.67
Mean: 4.27		
StDev: 1.33		
Relevant Trainings/Seminars		
more than 6	7	46.67
5 – 6	4	26.67
3 – 4	3	20.00
1 – 2	1	6.67
Mean: 1.87		
StDev: .99		
Number of Learners in Class		
31 and above	6	40.00
21 – 25	2	13.33
11 – 15	5	33.33
10 and below	2	13.33
Mean: 2.20		
StDev: 1.15		
Disabilities/Special Needs of Learners in Class	Frequency	Rank
Hearing Impairment	2	3
Autism Spectrum Disorder	6	2
Emotional and Behavioral Disorder	2	3
Physical and Health Disabilities	1	4
Intellectual Disability	8	1

Table 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the profile of participants in the study, shedding light on crucial aspects that influence their experiences in special education and inclusive settings. The distribution of years of teaching experience shows a varied sample, with the majority having 6 to 10 years of experience (53.33%), followed by those with 11 to 15 years (20.00%). This range underscores the mix of early-career and mid-career teachers participating in the study. The mean of 4.27 with a standard deviation of 1.33 suggests a moderate dispersion in the teaching experience data.

Regarding relevant trainings and seminars, the data indicates a significant focus on professional development. A substantial portion of participants reported attending more than six relevant trainings/seminars (46.67%), reflecting a commitment to ongoing

learning. The mean of 1.87 with a standard deviation of 0.99 points to some variability in the training attendance, indicating a range of engagement in professional development opportunities.

The number of learners in the participants' classes offers insight into the classroom dynamics. The highest proportion of participants indicated having 31 learners and above (40.00%), potentially highlighting the challenges of managing larger inclusive classrooms. The mean of 2.20 with a standard deviation of 1.15 suggests variability in class sizes, reflecting the diverse nature of teaching contexts.

The data on disabilities/special needs of learners in the class outlines the unique challenges teachers face. Participants reported a range of disabilities, with the most common being Intellectual Disability (ranked 1st) affecting eight learners, followed by autism spectrum disorder (ranked 2nd) affecting six learners. Hearing Impairment and Emotional/Behavioral Disorders were reported by two participants each, and Physical/Health Disabilities affected one learner. This distribution highlights the diverse range of disabilities teachers encounter in their classrooms.

Table 3. Meeting The Individualized Needs of Each Student

Indicator	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. securing resources and support to provide individualized instruction to students with special needs.	3.40	1.06	High Degree
2. dealing with diversity of students' needs, requiring different approaches to instruction.	3.47	0.92	High Degree
3. attending training and professional development opportunities for special education teachers.	3.33	1.35	Moderate Degree
4. adapting to changes in curriculum and teaching methods.	3.73	1.39	High Degree
5. access to assistive technology and other specialized equipment.	3.13	1.06	Moderate Degree
6. navigating parents to win their support.	3.80	1.26	High Degree
7. funding for teacher training and development	2.93	0.88	Moderate Degree
8. managing and addressing challenging behaviors in the classroom.	3.67	0.90	High Degree
9. balancing the needs of students with special needs with the needs of the rest of the class.	3.73	1.16	High Degree
Aggregate Mean:	3.47	0.78	High Degree

Table 3 provides a comprehensive evaluation of the challenges and efforts undertaken by teachers in special education and inclusive

settings to meet the individualized needs of each student. The indicators outlined in the table, along with their corresponding mean scores and standard deviations, present a nuanced understanding of the educators' experiences. Teachers reported a high degree of involvement in securing resources and support to provide individualized instruction to students with special needs, as well as in dealing with the diversity of students' needs that require varied instructional approaches. The need for continuous improvement is evident, as reflected in the moderate degree of attendance at training and professional development opportunities specifically tailored for special education teachers. Teachers also reported a high degree of adaptation to changes in curriculum and teaching methods, highlighting their flexibility and commitment to student success. The moderate degree of access to assistive technology and specialized equipment suggests that while efforts are being made, there is room for improvement in providing these essential tools for inclusive education. Navigating parents to gain their support is identified as a challenge, but teachers still reported a high degree of success in this aspect, underscoring their communication skills and dedication.

Funding for teacher training and development emerged as an area with a moderate degree of challenges, indicating the need for further investment in professional growth opportunities. Managing and addressing challenging behaviors in the classroom is acknowledged as a significant task, with teachers reporting a high degree of engagement in handling these situations effectively. Balancing the needs of students with special needs alongside those of the rest of the class is a demanding endeavor, yet teachers reported a high degree of effort in achieving this balance. The aggregate mean of 3.47 with a standard deviation of 0.78 indicates an overall high degree of dedication in meeting the individualized needs of each student, highlighting the commitment and resilience of educators in special education and inclusive settings.

Table 4 offers a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and complexities faced by teachers in special education and inclusive settings regarding paperwork and administrative tasks. The indicators, along with their corresponding mean scores and standard deviations, provide a detailed glimpse into the administrative aspects of their roles. Teachers reported a high degree of engagement in accomplishing urgent reports while tending to the diverse needs of their students, emphasizing their multitasking abilities. Similarly, preparing reports without proper orientation and dealing with an overwhelming amount of daily paperwork both garnered high mean scores, underlining the intensive administrative demands teachers face in these settings.

Seeking administrative support in completing reports emerged as a challenge with a moderate degree, suggesting room for improved collaboration between teachers and administrative staff. Additionally,

the moderate mean score for insufficient time allocation for reports submission highlights the need for balanced time management strategies.

Table 4. Paper work and Administrative Task

Indicator	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. accomplishing urgent reports while attending to various students with special needs	3.47	0.99	High Degree
2. preparing reports without proper orientation.	3.40	0.91	High Degree
3. overwhelming amount of paperwork teachers need to accomplish daily.	3.67	0.90	High Degree
4. seeking administrative support in accomplishing reports.	2.80	0.94	Moderate Degree
5. insufficient time allocation for reports submission.	3.33	0.82	Moderate Degree
6. seeking technical assistance in accomplishing reports.	3.07	1.16	Moderate Degree
7. coping with stress brought by bombardment of reports and handling numerous caseloads.	3.20	0.86	Moderate Degree
8. access to the technology they need to complete paperwork and administrative tasks.	3.20	1.26	Moderate Degree
9. having financial support needed to defray expenses for reports and accomplishments of ancillary assignments.	3.00	1.07	Moderate Degree
10. joining training in administrative tasks and paperwork.	2.87	1.13	Moderate Degree
Aggregate Mean:	3.20	0.68	Moderate Degree

Moreover, technical assistance in report completion also emerged as a moderate challenge, signaling potential areas for additional support. Coping with stress resulting from a barrage of reports and handling numerous caseloads garnered a moderate mean, showcasing the emotional toll these tasks can take on teachers.

The access to technology needed for administrative tasks received a moderate mean score, suggesting a balanced but not ideal level of support. Likewise, the financial support required to cover expenses related to reports and ancillary assignments also rated a moderate mean, pointing to the financial strain teachers may experience.

The moderate mean for joining administrative task and paperwork training implies a desire for more professional development opportunities in this domain. The aggregate mean of 3.20 with a standard deviation of 0.68 reflects a moderate degree of challenge in the realm of paperwork and administrative tasks. In conclusion, Table 4

highlights the multifaceted challenges teachers encounter in managing paperwork and administrative responsibilities within special education and inclusive settings. The range of mean scores underscores the need for both support and enhancement in various aspects of administrative support to enable teachers to provide effective and focused education to their students.

Table 5. Collaborating with Colleagues and Parents

Indicator	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. improving communication skills.	3.07	1.16	Moderate Degree
2. dealing with attitudinal differences between colleagues.	3.00	1.07	Moderate Degree
3. allocating time for collaboration with colleagues and parents.	3.33	0.98	Moderate Degree
4. navigating diverse attitudes of parents and colleagues.	3.47	0.74	High Degree
5. joining training in various content and pedagogies for special education which lead teachers to be hesitant to collaborate with colleagues.	2.93	0.70	Moderate Degree
6. having enough time to communicate with parents about their child's progress.	3.27	1.22	Moderate Degree
7. seeking technical assistance from master teachers and senior teachers.	3.07	1.10	Moderate Degree
8. seeking support and technical assistance from school heads.	3.07	1.10	Moderate Degree
9. incorporating feedback and suggestions from colleagues and parents into instructional practices and balance competing demands on time and resources.	3.07	0.96	Moderate Degree
10. avoiding detracting from instructional time or other essential responsibilities when collaborating with parents and colleagues.	3.20	1.01	Moderate Degree
Aggregate Mean:	3.15	0.84	Moderate Degree

Table 5 presents a thorough examination of the collaborative aspects of teachers' roles in special education and inclusive settings. The indicators, alongside their respective mean scores and standard deviations, provide insight into the complexities and dynamics of

collaborating with colleagues and parents. Improving communication skills received a moderate mean score, signaling an awareness of the need for effective interpersonal interactions. Similarly, addressing attitudinal differences between colleagues rated a moderate degree, underscoring the challenges of fostering cohesive teamwork. Allocating time for collaboration with colleagues and parents was moderately recognized, indicating an acknowledgment of the importance of collaboration in educational contexts. Navigating diverse attitudes of parents and colleagues garnered a high mean score, highlighting the recognition of the intricate nature of interactions in diverse stakeholder groups. Joining training in various content and pedagogies for special education that might lead to hesitancy in collaborating with colleagues was identified as a moderate challenge. Ensuring sufficient time for effective parent communication about their child's progress rated a moderate mean, suggesting room for optimizing communication channels.

Seeking technical assistance from master teachers, senior teachers, and school heads emerged as a moderate challenge, emphasizing the need for further support structures. Incorporating feedback and suggestions from colleagues and parents into instructional practices while balancing competing demands was recognized with a moderate mean, showcasing teachers' attempts to manage multiple responsibilities.

Avoiding detracting from instructional time or essential responsibilities during collaboration with parents and colleagues was recognized as moderately challenging. The aggregate mean of 3.15 with a standard deviation of 0.84 reflects a moderate degree of effort in collaborating with colleagues and parents. In conclusion, Table 5 underscores the multifaceted nature of collaboration within the context of special education and inclusive settings. The varied mean scores highlight the intricate dynamics teachers navigate while collaborating, both internally with colleagues and externally with parents. The moderate aggregate mean suggests a balanced level of engagement and recognition of the importance of effective collaboration for the success of inclusive educational environments.

Table 6. Relationship Between the Degree of Professional Challenges in Special Education and The Profile of Respondents

Variables	Chi-Square	Df	Critical Value	Significance	Result
Degree of Professional Challenges and					
Age	.297	36	2.000	Not significant	Ho accepted
Gender	.350	9	1.000	Not significant	Ho accepted
Civil Status	.350	9	1.000	Not significant	Ho accepted
Highest Educational Attainment	.333	18	1.414	Not significant	Ho accepted
Years of Teaching	.297	36	2.000	Not significant	Ho accepted
Relevant Trainings/Seminars	.314	27	1.732	Not significant	Ho accepted
No. of Learners in class	.314	27	1.732	Not significant	Ho accepted

The findings suggest that the profile variables, such as age, gender, educational background, years of teaching experience, participation in relevant training, and class size, do not significantly influence the degree of professional challenges experienced by teachers in special education and inclusive settings. The lack of significant relationships underscores the idea that the challenges these teachers face are complex and can be influenced by a range of factors beyond these demographic characteristics. In summary, the results of the Chi-Square tests indicate that the examined profile variables do not have a substantial impact on the degree of professional challenges reported by teachers in special education and inclusive settings. This further emphasizes the intricate and multifaceted nature of the challenges inherent to this field of education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this comprehensive study has shed light on the intricate landscape of challenges encountered by teachers in special education and inclusive settings. Through a detailed analysis of demographic profiles, professional challenges, collaboration dynamics, and administrative responsibilities, a nuanced picture has emerged. Teachers navigate a complex web of challenges, from addressing diverse student needs to managing administrative tasks and collaborating with colleagues and parents. The findings underscore the dedication and resilience of educators in striving to create inclusive and equitable learning environments. Notably, while various demographic factors were examined, the lack of statistically significant relationships with the degree of professional challenges highlights the multifaceted nature of these difficulties. This study provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers aiming to enhance support systems and strategies for teachers in special education and inclusive contexts, ultimately contributing to improved educational outcomes for all students.

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