

## **Lived Experiences of Special Education Teachers in the New Normal**

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### **Abstract**

*The primary objective of this research study is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the practical challenges special education teachers face when delivering services to students with disabilities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, given the altered format of education delivery in Ilocos Sur, Philippines. Five special education instructors who offer specialized educational services to students with disabilities are included in the study. The subsequent overarching motifs were identified via qualitative analysis of interview transcripts: (1) Feeling Stressed and (2) Challenges and Problems Encountered. The unparalleled shift towards distance learning, specifically modular learning, has engendered a sense of strain among educators, who perceive themselves as being (1) burnout teacher, (2) A teacher who lacks training, and (3) A teacher who needs support. SPED instructors encountered similar difficulties and obstacles when attempting to implement modular distance learning. They encountered challenges in (1) Contacting and Connecting to Students, (2) Planning the Activities, (3) Making the Learning Activity Sheets (LAS), and (4) Evaluating Incomplete and Unanswered LAS. The results of this study will offer insights into the practical challenges faced by special educators during distance learning, as well as identify supplementary resources that will enhance special education in the current paradigm.*

**Keywords:** *Special Education Teachers, Learners with Special Needs, Distance Learning.*

### **1. Introduction**

COVID-19 has slowed daily living. It has changed the school setting, forcing kids to learn virtually. Distance education has begun using technical tools and Internet-based education systems to keep school-age children worldwide educated during the pandemic (Cao et al., 2020). Online, face-to-face classes allow many individuals to attend, and modern education technology has made offline lessons on websites available (Onyema et al., 2020).

The Philippines followed suit by transferring instruction online. To ensure students' learning continuity, the government developed guidelines in many circumstances to discover alternative learning methods. DepEd Order No. 12, 2.202, A recent directive was to adopt the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan for the 2020-2021 school year in

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light of the COVID-19 public health emergency. Distance education success depends on teachers' infrastructure and technological knowledge to use distance education technologies. Many students find distance learning difficult, but those with academic, attention, or social-emotional problems may struggle more. Teachers must overcome an unprecedented challenge: reaching and teaching diverse learners online. It requires effort. However, many pupils need it.

DepEd assures the continuation of education and the provision of all disability services through distance learning. Although every effort is being made by the education system to accommodate children with disabilities, special educators may encounter variations in the way the law is enforced. Disability Inclusive Public Elementary Schools in Ilocos Sur include Cabugao South Central School & SPED Center, Candon South Central Elementary School, San Juan Elementary School, Narvacan South Central Elementary School, Sabuanan Elementary School SPED Center. These schools provide accessible and high-quality education for children with special needs. Likewise, among the twenty-one elementary schools comprising the Vigan City Division, only the Vigan Central School (VCS) provides specialized education for students.

The Vigan Central School, serves children with hearing (deaf), vision, autistic spectrum, ADHD, intellectual disability, speech impairment, and multiple disabilities. According to the UNESCO 2003 goals of special education, this school's SPED program educates children with special needs, encourages strong engagement of exceptional children in school, at home, and in the community, and trains them to live independently. Face-to-face teaching-learning was prohibited owing to COVID-19 in the area. Teachers had to teach using Learning Activity Sheets (LAS) modules.

Consequently, in light of the intricacies surrounding COVID-19 and the potentiality of face-to-face communication difficulties, educators are compelled to resort to remote learning. When educating students online, teachers still have the responsibility of monitoring the students' actions and ensuring their social and emotional well-being. Because of the increase in special education services and the specialized requirements that accompany them, distant learning presents a challenge that calls for a comprehensive comprehension of how such requirements will be satisfied through this channel. Teachers were obliged to adapt to these new obstacles and implement new teaching tactics while still controlling their confinement. This was necessary for them to be successful.

Education for All 2015 (EFA 2015) in the Philippines is a vision and comprehensive program of reforms to increase access to and improve the quality of elementary education for every Filipino by the year 2015. The provision of education to all Filipinos marked the introduction of an alternative learning system that could be supplemented with traditional institutions to assist and engage struggling students more effectively. This requires not only the involvement of the Department of Education but also the participation of the entire society, including national and local government agencies as well as groups that are part of civil society, as providers of fundamental educational requirements.

According to the UNESCO case study, in a nation such as the Philippines, where all citizens are guaranteed citizenship, children and adolescents with special needs are provided with educational opportunities that enable them to realize their full potential as contributing members of society and lead meaningful and satisfying lives. Nonetheless, two provisions of the Philippine Constitution from 1987 mandate special education. Section 17 of Article II mandates that the state gives education precedence, while Section 1 of Article XIV ensures universal access. As a result, SPED centers have been established in each division to facilitate the local administration of the Special Education Program.

The Philippines, like other nations, required additional time to prepare for this educational transformation. To ensure excellent modular and online instruction, the

Department of Education has created numerous solutions. However, one major question is how special education teachers in the country would satisfy the needs of special needs students. Moving all classes online in a few days is a massive and disruptive task. A complete online course involves a detailed lesson plan, audio and video content, and technical assistance. Many educators are devoid of online teaching experience, professional development, and understanding of online learning platforms due to the impact of COVID-19 (Bao, 2020). In order to ensure the provision of superior education across various media platforms and to all students, educational institutions, including teacher preparation programs, must provide virtual instruction training for instructors, as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regardless of prior experience with online instruction, general and special education instructors were obligated to provide all students with high-quality instruction throughout the COVID-19-mandated school closures. Strategies for promoting disability inclusion in special education teacher training frequently include social-emotional development, behavior management, and direct instruction (Duran & Aytac, 2016). However, further research is needed to determine if and how these tactics work online. Since online teachers report minimal control over content or learning experiences, these tactics may not be effective (Duran and Aytac, 2016, 2016).

## 2. Objectives

In the context of the New Normal, the researchers intend to ascertain the firsthand experiences of special education instructors as they instruct students with special needs via distance learning. Specifically, it aims to (1) discuss how it feels to teach learners with special needs and (2) determine the challenges experienced by special education teachers.

## 3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design. Total enumeration was considered and the participants in the study are the five Special Education Teachers of the Vigan Central School, Vigan City, Ilocos Sur. According to Boyd (2001), a phenomenological study needs two to 10 individuals to reach theoretical saturation, hence this research has enough participants. They must be special education teachers, have taught throughout the pandemic regardless of age, gender, or teaching position, and be willing to engage in the study. Their demographic and teaching-related characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Participants	Age	Years as a Special Education teacher	Nature of Learners Handled During the Pandemic
P1	37	12 years	Autism Spectrum Disorder and Totally Blind
P2	58	13 years	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
P3	24	3 years	Hearing Impaired (Deaf) and Low vision
P4	43	15 years	Speech Impaired
P5	38	11 years	Intellectual Disability

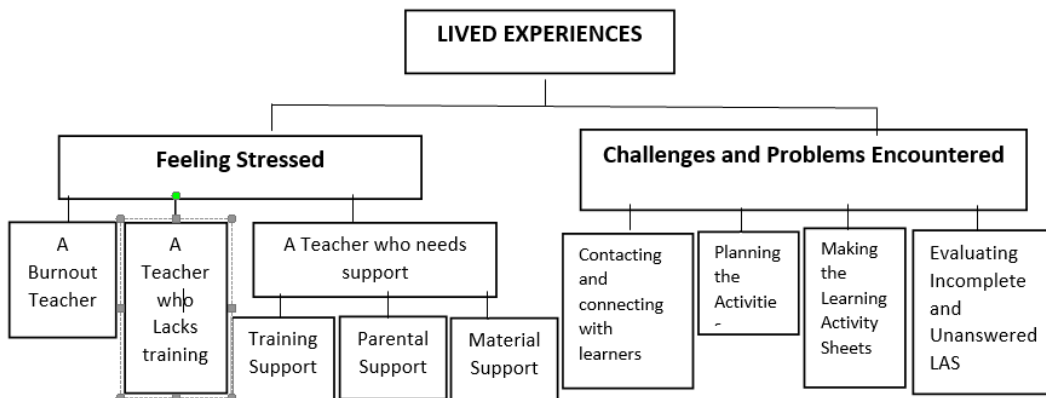
Primary data came from teachers' narratives. A semi-structured interview guide was utilized since it provides questions that may help researchers get the information they need throughout the in-depth interview. The duration of the interview ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, during which it was recorded in audio format for subsequent transcription. To address the presence of vernacular language utilized by certain participants, the researchers decided to employ the expertise of a grammarian to facilitate the translation of the transcriptions into English. The researchers utilized the software HyperResearch to expedite the analysis of the collected data. Thematic analysis was employed to assess the data about teachers' experiences in providing education to students with special needs in the context of remote learning during the period of the "new normal."

The present study has undergone the necessary ethical review process conducted by the Ethics Review Committee of the University of Northern Philippines-University Research and Development Office. The participants were requested to provide their consent, and they were duly briefed about the research protocol. The study exclusively included individuals who expressed their willingness to participate in interviews. The highest level of confidentiality was maintained.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the firsthand experiences of special education teachers in the execution of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The collection of qualitative data was conducted through the utilization of semi-structured interview guides. Figure 1 shows two themes that emerged, which include the challenges and problems and the needs of special education teachers. It also included categories in every theme.

Figure 1: Themes and Categories of the Lived Experiences of SPED Teachers



#### 4.1 Participants' Feelings in Teaching Learners with Special Needs

##### Theme 1. Feeling Stressed

Special education services must be provided across all facets of education, irrespective of the mode of delivery. As a result of the unprecedented shift to distance learning, especially modular learning, the following negative emotions have been experienced by educators: (1) A burnout teacher, (2) A teacher who lacks training, and (3) A teacher who needs support.

##### 4.1.1 A Burnout Teacher

According to Reimers et al. (2020), the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated significant modifications in the realm of daily instruction. As a result, the participants

have been required to promptly adjust their instructional methods to accommodate online or modular teaching, posing a potentially significant obstacle for special education educators. The special education teachers experienced burnout, had negative sentiments about the discharge of their duties in the new normal, and exclaimed:

“I am so physically tired. I have not had enough sleep because of the weekly preparation of the learning activity sheets.” (P4)

"Exhausted! I feel so exhausted because of modular teaching and learning. Every week we must come up with our own LAS and it is physically tiring." (P1)

In light of the escalating prevalence of COVID-19 within the community, it can be inferred that several educators have also been compelled to attend to the needs of their afflicted family members. Throughout the lockdown, a considerable number of educators successfully navigated these difficulties while experiencing social isolation from their acquaintances and loved ones. This observation highlights the presence of job overload, time pressure, and physical strain among teachers, factors that significantly contribute to upsetting experiences within the professional environment. Consequently, educators have encountered a multitude of obstacles that could have intensified feelings of stress and burnout (Cadorna, et.al, 2023).

Due to their unwavering commitment to their professional responsibilities, the teachers occasionally neglect to monitor their well-being. This suggests that educators should not only prioritize allocating time for rest but also actively seek methods to relax and decompress to prevent excessive workload and burnout. The consideration of appropriate scheduling of activities and the prioritization of one's health are important factors to be taken into account.

#### 4.1.2. A Teacher Who Lacks Training

Certain educators had the belief that due to the novelty of the modality, teachers were undergoing a phase of adaptation. Therefore, it is imperative to organize a variety of training and capacity-building initiatives to ensure that instructors have optimal learning opportunities. The efficacy of the training obtained by the teachers was also questioned due to its online format.

"DepEd has only conducted training for regular teachers. Unfortunately, we have not received any seminar or training workshop for special education teachers." (P2)

“There is no specific training conducted for us and every training is through online delivery. Because my connection is sometimes lost, I have missed some of the points of the discussion.” (P4)

The participants' statement suggests a lack of adequate training provided to them throughout the pandemic. Given that the majority of the training sessions were primarily designed for instructors in general education settings, there was a perceived demand among educators for specialized training tailored specifically to the unique requirements of special education teachers. This suggests that it is imperative to provide specialized training to special education instructors to enhance their skills. The school or the Department of Education (DepEd) may contemplate offering specialized training to SPED teachers that is pertinent to the evolving educational environment. In light of the aforementioned considerations, educators must possess the requisite expertise and competencies to effectively facilitate the academic progress of students with exceptional requirements, enabling them to reach their utmost capabilities.

#### 4.1.3. A Teacher Who Needs Support

In response to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions across the country have implemented remote learning methods, with a special emphasis on modular distance learning. Consequently, the participants showed a strong inclination to

express their requirements for addressing the stress they experienced, encompassing provisions such as educational instruction, support from parents, and access to necessary resources.

#### 4.1.3.1. Training Support

Enhancing the capacity of educators is a key strategy for ensuring the efficacy of remote education. When educators lack sufficient knowledge and skills in utilizing distant learning as a teaching mode, their ability to successfully enhance students' learning experiences is compromised. All of the participants emphasized the necessity of receiving training, with a specific focus on the professional development of special education teachers.

The participants' statements align with the conclusions drawn by Rasmitadila et al. (2020), which indicate that the main obstacle hindering the successful implementation of remote learning is a technical barrier encompassing the teacher's proficiency in utilizing this modality for educational purposes. Educators noted that during the training sessions, they engaged in discussions regarding the insufficiency and unsuitability of the training they had received. Participants uttered:

"The best thing that I will receive this pandemic is special training intended for us. Most of the given training is for regular teachers. I think we deserve one or more training, too." (P2)

"Yes, I need training. They have given us training but I find it irrelevant to my students. I hope they give us training on making printed LAS for special children or even teaching our pupils online and in the module." (P4)

According to Reimers et al. (2020), it is imperative to provide training and enhance the skills of teachers in the present educational approach. This is necessary to ensure that their pedagogical subject knowledge aligns with the requirements of learners in the current circumstances. Moreover, the transition to distance learning presents an opportunity for teachers to engage in professional development activities such as capacity-building, training, and seminars. These activities aim to improve teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills, considering the changes in competencies and teaching modalities. This suggests that the teaching methodologies commonly employed by teachers in traditional face-to-face instruction may not be directly transferable to distance learning, necessitating the provision of appropriate and tailored training for special education teachers.

#### 4.1.3.2. Parental Support

On July 21, 2020, DepEd issued Memorandum No. DM-CI-2020-00162, which underscored the substantial role that parents have played in the effective execution and utilization of distance learning amidst the current challenging circumstances. Educators also emphasized that a significant proportion of their students' parents were employed, resulting in limited availability to contribute to and support their children's educational endeavors. Furthermore, educators were also privy to the parental discourse surrounding the further responsibility imposed upon them due to the implementation of modular remote learning. The subjects experienced heightened levels of stress due to the perceived absence of parental support. The teachers held the belief and expressed a desire for a robust link between parents and instructors. The participants expressed:

"This pandemic requires the cooperation of parents. We need their support. Since we cannot teach them face-to-face, they should be there to guide their children." (P4)

"Some of my parents cannot help their children because they are busy with their work. Other parents did not undergo formal education, and they cannot even read what is on the LAS. Though I completely understand their situations, their support is undeniably requested and needed now." (P2)

This partnership is crucial in ensuring that kids derive maximum benefits from the educational process during the current period (Kritzer & Smith, 2020). This suggests that supervision plays a crucial role, highlighting the need for parental assistance to be provided to both students and educators. It is advisable for parents to regularly monitor and provide guidance to their children in responding to the Learning Activity Sheets (LAS) whenever feasible. Parents are advised to seek clarification or support from educators in instances when there are concerns (Avila and Acena, 2020). Hence, educators must demonstrate a profound comprehension of both the circumstances faced by students and the concerns of their parents. Individuals must possess qualities of forgiveness and empathy.

#### 4.1.3.3. Material Support

Given that modules are utilized as the primary mode of instruction and learning; teachers will want resources to generate printed Learning Activity Sheets. According to the interview, the teachers expressed a collective desire for adequate provision of resources to effectively support their students in the context of remote learning. It was disclosed by the educators that they were responsible for the printing of the complete collection of Learning Activity Sheets, utilizing their resources. Hence, the request is being made for supplies that have yet to be furnished. The participants revealed:

"Coupon Bond, Ink, and even printer. These are what I need to produce the LAS." (P1)

"I need a printer because we are the ones who print. In other divisions, the SDO prints the materials." (P2)

The aforementioned assertions align with the research conducted by Tria (2020), which supports the notion that modular instruction is a novel pedagogical approach implemented under the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP). All of these require sufficient resources to be actualized. Adequate resources are a fundamental requirement for the efficient production and delivery of the LAS. Therefore, educational institutions must ensure that teachers are equipped with the necessary resources to effectively apply the required curriculum. This suggests that educators are depleting their resources in the creation of the necessary materials for remote education. Therefore, educational institutions must ensure equitable allocation of resources among teachers, while also exploring other approaches to address this issue.

## 4.2 The Challenges Experienced by Special Education Teachers

### Theme 2: Challenges and Problems Encountered

Due to the extraordinary transition to distance learning, particularly modular learning, instructors have encountered the following challenges: (1) Contacting and Connecting to Students, (2) Planning the Activities, and (3) Making Learning Activity Sheets, and (4) Evaluating Incomplete and Unanswered Learning Activity Sheets

#### 4.2.1 Contacting and Connecting to Students

During the conducted interviews, participants expressed that they employed a range of strategies to establish communication with students, such as engaging in phone conversations, sending text messages, utilizing email correspondence, utilizing Google Meet, and employing Messenger. In light of the aforementioned considerations, it is evident that children with disabilities cannot independently operate electronic devices. This observation reveals the teachers' efforts to establish communication and foster relationships with their students to the best of their abilities. However, it should be noted that not all individuals possess the necessary technological devices to participate in the "Online kumustahan." Participants mentioned:

"It is very difficult to contact them. I even created a group chat in Messenger, so I give there the announcements. (P3)

“When I call them, they do not answer. So, what I do is text them because it is the easiest way to inform my students and no internet will be needed.” (P4)

These are actual problems experienced by the teachers, resulting in lost instructional time that might increase dropout rates and achievement gaps (Ginsberg et al., 2014). In general, the participants made several attempts to establish communication and engage with the students and families but were unsuccessful in establishing any engagement. This suggests that educators should consistently seek avenues for engaging in communication with their students to gain insight into their circumstances. Moreover, it is recommended that regular wellness assessments be carried out on students and their families to enhance the level of communication between the educational institution and the household.

#### 4.2.2 Planning the Activities

Due to the global COVID-19 outbreak, special education teachers had to swiftly transition from traditional in-person instruction to online or modular teaching methods. All participants had difficulties in devising educational activities for their respective learners. The adverse situation has resulted in significant efforts to strategize and organize activities that are most suitable for distance learning. Participants exclaimed:

“It was very abrupt. I don’t know how to teach my students without seeing them in person. I have activities in mind but translating these plans into modular teaching is difficult. It is better to teach them in person, but it is not allowed.” (P1)

“I do not know how modular learning will apply to my pupils that is why planning the activities become too difficult for me.” (P4)

This observation highlights the challenges encountered by educators in preparing for students' learning engagements. In light of their accustomed practice of instructing pupils in a traditional classroom setting, it is evident that they harbored lingering uncertainties. This suggests that it is important for teachers to be provided with sufficient time to arrange the various activities that their students will undertake. Facilitating cognitive clarity among students would enhance the efficacy of instructional delivery and knowledge acquisition.

#### 4.2.3 Making Learning Activity Sheets

The Department of Education (DepEd) has implemented a printed modular learning system wherein pupils are furnished with self-learning materials (SLMs) or Learning Activity Sheets (LAS). The special education teachers encountered difficulties during the process of preparing the learning activity sheets. In the interim, certain educators willingly procured instructional resources using their funds to serve as a point of reference during the development of the LAS. Furthermore, it has been observed that educators possess the necessary skills to utilize technology; nevertheless, challenges arise when it comes to the creation and refinement of instructional materials. Participants said:

“Making LAS is very difficult because we do not have enough resources. We lack books and references.” (P2)

“I had to spend my own money to buy books and subscribe online just to have something to use as a reference in making the LAS.” (P3)

This aligns with the conclusions drawn by Henaku (2020), which indicate that teachers possess an awareness of the potential benefits of incorporating technology into the learning process. However, they were unprepared for the magnitude of this transformative shift, particularly about the creation of printed educational materials. This suggests that it is incumbent upon the educational institution to furnish its teachers with the essential resources required for reference purposes. Moreover, adequate resources must be



provided to the teachers to print the activity sheets. Effective instruction delivery can be achieved by the utilization of appropriate tools, materials, and resources.

#### 4.2.4 Evaluating Incomplete and Unanswered Learning Activity Sheets

In the context of modular distance learning, the major means of assessing students' level of knowledge and learning were the Learning Activity Sheets and their corresponding summative assessments. However, during the discussion, educators expressed their willingness to acknowledge that a significant number of students submitted modules that were incomplete and contained unanswered questions. Certain participants expressed skepticism regarding the veracity of the responses provided for the learning activities that were assigned to them. The participants revealed:

"As a teacher, it is a problem when my pupils give me incomplete answers on their LAS. At the same time, I understand that most of my pupils will need assistance from their parents." (P1)

"My students returning their learning modules without answers or incomplete answers in exercises and activities is a big problem." (P3)

The observation made by Castroverde and Acala (2021) aligns with the notion that meeting school-imposed deadlines poses a significant obstacle in the context of modular distance learning. According to Reimers et al. (2020), it is critical to reevaluate and reorder the objectives of the curriculum. The issues about the submission of LAS have already been brought to light, which necessitates prompt resolution. Instructors might consider whether the developed materials are excessively difficult, leading to students submitting modules that are unfinished or lack answers. They might contemplate incorporating the acronym "KISS," which stands for "Keeping it brief and simple," into the LAS.

## 5. Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that educators in the field of special education had elevated levels of stress while providing instruction to students with special needs through remote learning during the current unprecedented circumstances. The change to distant learning, particularly with the implementation of modular learning, has presented significant challenges for teachers, resulting in feelings of tension and perceived limitations in their abilities such as (1) A burnout teacher, (2) A teacher who lacks training, and (3) A teacher who needs support. Using the new modality of teaching needs new knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be realized. As such, the participants were very vocal in raising their needs to somehow lessen the stress they encountered which included training support, parental support, and material support. SPED teachers also experienced challenges and problems in the implementation of modular distance learning. They experienced difficulty in (1) Contacting and Connecting to Students, (2) Planning the Activities, (3) Making the Learning Activity Sheets (LAS) and (4) Evaluating Incomplete and Unanswered LAS.

The Department of Education (DepEd) may consider reevaluating the existing teaching practices associated with modular learning. A program offering technical help and mentoring may be extended to instructors who encounter difficulties in efficiently utilizing a specific teaching and learning modality. These teachers may be given priority in participating in various capacity-building and professional development initiatives. They may also find other ways to reduce the pressure on instructors from modular education, particularly module reproduction. Future research should employ quantitative or mixed methods to capitalize on the strengths and limitations of the study's findings and to investigate alternative approaches for examining the difficulties and mechanisms

encountered by special education teachers in implementing modular distance learning within the country.

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