

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN USING PLAY-BASED APPROACH IN TEACHING ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Abstract

The study employed a phenomenological approach to come up with an in-depth study about the lived experiences of special education teachers in using the play-based approach in teaching online distance learning for students with special needs. The researcher used a phenomenological, qualitative research method to identify and understand the concepts of the research, in line with its purpose. Also, the researcher utilized a semi-structured interview guideline as instrument for data gathering, the following themes were generated: (A) Increasing Motivation, Attention Span and Engagement for Students With Special Needs, (B) Parents/Guardians As the New Teacher Aid in Online Distance Learning, (C) The Competitiveness of Students With Special Needs Through Play, (D) Developing Academic Performance through: "Learning by playing", (E) Using Online - Application Base as a New Online Teaching Strategies for Students with Special Needs, (F) Coping And Transitioning to the New Normal in Education, and (G) Passion for Online teaching and Determination to learn in amidst of covid 19 pandemic. These themes are the features of participants' accounts, characterizing particular perceptions and their lived experiences using a play-based approach in this online distance learning during the pandemic. The interpretation of the data collected was presented through a pure descriptive analysis.

Keywords: Lived Experiences, Special Education Teachers, Play-Based Approach, Children with Special Needs, Online Distance Learning, pandemic.

1. Context and Rationale

During the COVID-19 pandemic, online distance learning has been a challenge for many educators, families, and students to create a plan for teaching and learning without the classroom being involved. One of the ideas that came up is to adopt a distance learning method using an online platform. Far from being a one-size-fits-all approach to education, online distance learning is even more challenging for special education (SPED) teachers and students. A lot of factors have to be considered, including having the teachers adjust their usual teaching methods to an online platform to comply with their special students' needs.

Conspicuously, special education (SPED) teachers find a way to catch their student's attention and to make their lessons more fun and interesting by implementing a play-based approach like charades, bring me, mini - board activity, treasure hunting, singing, dancing, guessing pictures, songs, and many more. The benefits of this approach in their online distance classes it allows students with special needs to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength

through education. Also, it is important for healthy brain development, and it involves both child-initiated and teacher-supported learning.

The study aims to determine the lived experiences of special education teachers in using a play-based approach in teaching online distance learning for students with special needs. The researcher wants to conduct this study to help the special education (SPED) teachers in their online classes through different online platform games and to make the students more aware of the environment and be an active participants in the class. Additionally, integrating a play-based approach in their online classes is an opportunity to lessen the academic, social, and motivational gaps between students with special needs and those without.

1.1. Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of the special education teachers in using a play-based approach in teaching online distance learning for students with special needs.

The following guidelines and questions lead to the purpose and assumptions of this study:

- How do special education teachers describe the play-based approach in teaching students with special needs in their online distance learning?
- Using the play-based approach in online distance learning, how do special education teachers describe the behavior of students with special needs?
- How does this play-based approach improve the learning skills of students with special needs in terms of:
 - Physical skills
 - Behavioral skills
 - Cognitive skills.
- What play-based approach did the special education teachers use in online distance learning in teaching students with special needs, and describe the process of doing it in an online class set up?
- How did the special education teachers describe the lived experiences in using a play-based approach in their online distance learning?
- What insights were gained by special education teachers from a play-based approach that they think may help them improve their teaching strategy for students with special needs?

2. Research Methodology

This study utilized a phenomenological, qualitative method design. This design aims to describe and assess the lived experiences of the special education teachers in teaching students with special needs during their online distance learning classes. Phenomenological research is an inquiry that describes the researcher's perception of the meaning of the lived experiences disclosed by the participants. Also, the researcher employed the tenets of thematic analysis of research to find out the lived experiences of the special education teachers in using a play-based approach in teaching online for students with special needs.

2.1 Participants and/or other Sources of Data and Information

The population frame for this study would be limited to eight (8) special education teachers, teaching learners with special educational needs in Mary Immaculate Parish Special School in Moonwalk Village, Las Piñas City.

2.2 Data Gathering Methods

The initial procedure to gather data is to give informed consent to the qualified participants of the study, who are chosen using a total enumeration sampling technique. Total population sampling is a type of purposive sampling technique that involves examining the entire population.

The informed consent indicates the permission to allow the interview in their school for the special education teachers as proof of their qualification as participants in the study. It would also state the confidentiality of the information and recorded audio or video of the interview for the data privacy and safety of the participants. Upon signing of informed consent, a virtual interview would be scheduled by the researcher to ask questions about the lived experiences of the special education teachers in using a play-based approach in teaching online distance learning for students with special needs.

The interview guideline consists of three parts. In the first part, the researcher would try to establish a friendly atmosphere with the participants by asking questions about the children with special needs and other personal information. This is done to ensure that the participants would become comfortable with the presence of the researcher, so participants may give valuable answers. The second part of the interview is when the researcher asks questions from the interview guide, and this shall be done in a maximum of 1 hour. The participants should not feel obligated to answer all of the questions at once, as they might have other personal things to do. The third part is the continuation of the interview and the time when the researcher clarifies the answer of participants.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data gathered in this research study were analyzed using the principles of thematic analysis. This approach in qualitative research design for collecting data includes six steps. The first one is the familiarization with the data, the researcher reads the transcription of the interview to be familiar with the responses of the participants to each of the questions. Second is the generation of tentative codes, this step is very important to understand the insights of the participants thoroughly. Coding is a form of heuristics through which the participants can have a grasp of what they participants wanted to tell in a simpler and more organized way. The third step is the elucidation of themes, where the researcher makes a lucid or clear explanation of the participants' experiences. The fourth step is the review of themes. Themes in qualitative research are features of participants' interpretations characterizing experiences that the researcher sees as relevant to the research purposes or questions. Coding is important in identifying themes. The fifth step is the delineation of themes, where the researcher would describe or portray the experiences of the participants accurately. Lastly and the sixth step is the production of the written report, to which the researcher must consider the audience. This report must provide sufficient pieces of evidence of the theme using clear examples from the collected data. This should be concise, coherent, logical, interesting, and non-repetitive (Africa, 2016).

Thematic analysis is applied to analyze transcript data that emerge from interviews and focus groups, and less often from observations. Thematic analysis aims to create a comprehensive and systematic record of the coding and themes that are raised in interviews or observations. In thematic analysis, the researchers identify the themes in transcript data from participants, and then attempt to confirm, verify, and expand these themes, and also repeat the procedure in order to find new themes. The researchers first read the transcripts of the interviews or observations and create the appropriate initial coding framework. Codings with similar content are then compiled into themes with a wider range. The initial coding framework and themes are created according to the theoretical framework of each study, based on the personal judgment and experience of the researchers. Thematic analysis in qualitative research is a more subjective process than analysis in quantitative research, since, for example, different researchers may create a different initial coding framework and identify different themes. For this reason, in thematic analysis, examination of validity is very important in order to decrease bias and produce a more rigorous analysis. Participants' validation and researcher validation provide the main approach for checking the validity in thematic analysis, but unfortunately, there is no definitive answer to the issue of validity in thematic analysis. For good results, the analysis should: (a) be performed according to clear methodological principles, (b) include all the data that are collected, and (c) be

comprehensive and systematic. The researchers should always search for contrary or deviant data that are different from the main findings, since these data could improve the overall results of the analysis. Finally, in their publications, the researchers should provide a detailed explanation of how their data were collected and analyzed, in order to help readers to make a critical assessment of the study (Galanis, 2018).

3. Discussion of Results

The insights from the study were summarized by the seven (7) themes generated from the interview with the Special Education Teachers. These are the following: *“Increasing Motivation, Attention Span and Engagement for Students With Special Needs”*, *“Parents/Guardians As the New Teacher Aid in Online Distance Learning”*, *“The Competitiveness of Students With Special Needs Through Play”*, *“Developing Academic Performance through: “Learning by playing”*, *“Using Online - Application Based as a New Online Teaching Strategies for Students with Special Needs”*, *“Coping And Transitioning to the New Normal in Education”*, and *“Passion for Online teaching and Determination to learn in amidst of covid 19 pandemic”*. These are the features of participants' accounts characterizing particular perceptions and their lived experiences using a play-based approach in online distance learning.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

The play-based approach in online distance learning supported and provided the needs of special education (SPED) teachers on how to teach, to catch the attention, and motivate the students with special needs during the pandemic or in the new normal education. The majority of the participants expressed their love, determination, and passion for teaching and guiding their students with special needs while facing the pandemic. They also focused on the academic and physical needs of the children through learning by playing. However, three (3) SPED teacher participants reported the difficulties encountered due to the fact that they are untrained and have unstable internet connections at their homes. Hence, the researcher concluded a great need for training, seminars, and guidance, or a good relationship with parents, should be provided for the special education teacher in teaching students with special needs in online distance learning.

In this play-based approach, children with special needs somehow interact with the teachers, the sense of touch is very important, movements of the body, exercise, to make them participate in the class.

With the use of this play-based approach, the behavior of students with special needs doesn't show that they are learning their lesson, but rather playing while learning. Out of four (4) special education teachers, notice that some of their students are being competitive to one another. But at the end of the game, they know how to accept their failures in losing the game.

The use of play – based approach in online distance learning enhances the learning skills of students with special needs in (1) Physical skills, by using their mouse to develop their fine and gross motors skills and through dancing and other activities such as bring me/show me they can enhance in their hands and foot coordinator. (2) Behavioral skills, they have sportsmanship in playing the game through accepting failures and defeats, and develop their patience in taking turns during the game. Lastly, in (3), Cognitive skills with the use of this approach enhance their critical thinking by learning through play.

Out of 8 special education (SPED) teachers participants applied this play-based approach and teaching strategies in meeting the academic and basic needs of students with special needs during the pandemic. The applications they are using in playing are Quizziz, Kahoot, and Google Jamboard. This application integrates it into their subjects. From the SPED teacher's perspective, collaboration with their co-workers, school, and parents can strengthen the learning needs of students with special needs. And also, it is very important to catch the attention and develop the needs of the students with special needs, and protect the children from the COVID-19 virus by staying at home. However, there are 4 participants who also apply the teacher-based

instructions in giving the play-based approach, these are: mini board activities, bring me, print out activities, and some manipulative toys such as blocks and puzzles.

The sudden transition of classroom environment from face-to-face to online learning is a big challenge to both SPED teachers, students with special needs, and parents in the new normal setup. They are caught up in sustaining the quality of education they are offering to a new and seemingly complex mode of learning delivery- online classes. The result of this study will help these school administrators design a program that would fit specifically to children with special needs. The researcher believed that more than gaining from school administrators also adhere to provide quality education amidst pandemic most especially to children with special needs.

The effects of a play-based approach in online distance learning for the Special Education (SPED) teachers helps children with special needs to provide the learning goals, develop and enhance their needs in learning.

This play-based approach was highlighted from the findings of the study. In a positive view, six (6) SPED teacher participants appreciate the extended quality time of teaching and ensuring the quality of education during lockdowns and quarantine periods. They were able to use this approach in handling the misbehaving behaviors of the students with special needs.

On the other hand, the study also reveals the negative effects of the play-based approach on children with special needs. Out of 4 participants stated that they are having lost connections, and the students are having a hard time accepting failures in the game. However, these SPED teachers manage or find a way if they lose their internet connection by having a backup internet in their homes, and if the students lose their internet connection, the SPED teachers give more and giving consideration to their students. Due to this situation, a play-based approach makes the students competitive with one another. And three (3) SPED teachers don't know if their students are the ones who are playing the game or their parents of the students.

In order to face the challenges brought by the pandemic, the eight (8) special education (SPED) teacher participants of the study developed their way of coping. These coping mechanisms for the SPED teachers include activities for training and seminars. They also use this approach specified of their source of teaching and to support students with special needs to keep them motivated, learned, and inspired during the trying times. Through these coping mechanisms, and mental well-being of the participants was taken care of. And through this play-based approach, SPED teachers can easily deliver their lessons in online distance learning.

In the play-based approach, it is expected that both the students and parents are computer literate and the internet connection is good to be able to easily and quickly follow the instructions of the activities.

4.2 Recommendations

Both public and private school administrators must continue and implement the use of this play-based approach in not just teaching students with special needs but also in the regular students. This is the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of using a play-based approach and develop an innovative hybrid model of teaching and learning suited to specific special educational needs. The Department of Education of the Philippines should strengthen in giving policies, memoranda, and training about teaching pedagogies in using a play-based approach for children with special needs to provide effective essential learning skills to children at home using the limited available resources. For teachers and parents with special needs, they must have training and seminars to be more equipped for the new normal education and to become computer literate. Based on the findings of the study, it is suggested that special education teachers must continue to adhere to their education even though there are no face-to-face classes and preventive measures to stay safe during the pandemic, but be aware of its potential negative impact on their overall well-being. And to cope with this strategy, such as finding positive meaning in the situation, keeping worthwhile and enjoyable activities, reaching out to schools and colleagues to survive through this pandemic without sacrificing well-being. For future researchers, this study could be their reference and research in understanding the concept of play-based approach in teaching students with special needs in their online distance learning.\

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