

Lived experiences of Special Needs Education Professionals in Handling Learners with Intellectual Disability

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the lived experiences of special needs education (SNED) professionals who work with children with intellectual disabilities (ID). The study recognizes the crucial role played by these professionals in supporting the different facets of the development and educational needs of children with ID. By examining their lived experiences, this research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges, rewards, and perspectives that shape their professional journeys.

Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of SNED professionals, including teachers, therapists, and support staff, who work directly with children with ID. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns within the narratives.

Preliminary findings reveal that SNED professionals face numerous challenges, including navigating individualized education plans, addressing complex behavioral issues, and adapting instructional strategies to meet diverse learning needs. However, they also report significant rewards, such as witnessing the progress and growth of their students, building strong connections with families, and experiencing personal fulfilment in making a positive impact on children's lives.

This research contributes to the existing literature by shedding light on the multifaceted experiences of SNED professionals in the context of children with ID. The findings have implications for professional development, support systems, and policy initiatives aimed at enhancing the well-being and effectiveness of SNED professionals in their vital roles.

Keywords: Experiences; professionals; Intellectual; Disability; Implications; Development; Effectiveness;

1. INTRODUCTION

Special education professionals are crucial in providing quality education and support to learners with intellectual disabilities (ID). Understanding their lived experience is essential for identifying their challenges and developing effective strategies to enhance the educational outcomes of students with ID. This research aims to investigate the experiences of special education professionals in handling learners with intellectual disabilities, highlight the difficulties encountered, and explore potential approaches for improving support and inclusive practices.

Children with disabilities are seen to have less support from their environment. (Law, M. et al., 2013). Participation in extracurricular activities is critical for supporting the development of social interactions, necessary skills and competencies, as well as mental and physical health and well-being in children. In order for these children to participate and be functional, they need the support of individuals who study and get licenses to help them. The findings of this research study provide an insight into the viewpoints of experts on how to minimize challenges and find resolutions while supporting children who have intellectual disabilities.

On the other hand, the job efficiency that comes with job roles and responsibilities are seen to be changing compared to the previous generations of SNED Professionals. These changes include the pursuit of personal growth, or responding to external factors. (Berdud, M., Cabasés, J. M., & Nieto, J., 2016). While existing research has examined various aspects of job motivations, there is a need to explore the subjective experiences, emotions, challenges, and strategies individuals employ during the support process. By delving into the narratives of those who have handled children with intellectual disabilities, this study aims to provide valuable insights to inform career development practices, support services, and policies.

2. Purpose of the Study

The conducted study's primary goal is to gain in-depth insights into the personal experiences and perspectives of professionals working in the field of special education. Specifically, the study seeks to investigate and comprehend the unique challenges, successes, and difficulties these professionals encounter when interacting with learners diagnosed with intellectual disabilities.

By delving into the lived experiences of Special Education Professionals, the study aims to shed light on the various aspects of their professional roles, including teaching methodologies, classroom management techniques, individualized support strategies, and the emotional and psychological impact of working with learners with intellectual disabilities. Through firsthand narratives and personal accounts, the study endeavors to uncover the practical knowledge, coping mechanisms, and effective approaches utilized by these professionals in addressing the diverse needs and abilities of learners with intellectual disabilities.

Ultimately, the study's purpose is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived realities of Special Needs Education Professionals, which can inform the development of evidence-based practices, policies, and interventions that enhance the quality of education and support provided to individuals with intellectual disabilities.

3. Research Objectives

This study aims to shed light on essential areas of their work by studying their views, such as interactions, support systems, and the impact of existing restrictions on their profession:

- To provide an in-depth understanding of the roles, experiences, and challenges faced by professionals working with intellectually disabled students.
- To identify the coping mechanism on the issues and challenges of Special Education Needs (SNED) professionals.
- To impart the improvement of professional training programs, policy creation, and overall service delivery for intellectually disabled learners.

4. Research Question

The research question addressed in this study revolves around the lived experiences of special education professionals working with learners who have intellectual disabilities. It aims to shed light on the following key questions:

- What are the lived experiences of professionals handling learners with intellectual disabilities?
- What is the coping mechanism that SPED professionals use in handling learners with intellectual disabilities?
- What are the possible insights that you can share about handling learners with Intellectual Disabilities?

5. Theoretical Lens

Finding fresher methods for dealing with intellectual disability was the goal. The researchers used more recent ideas and recent updates to more established theories in the study. Researchers concentrated on special needs education and self-determination while developing a new theory, called the Casual Agency Theory in which Integrated Differential Developmental Theory consisted of a theory of mental architecture that was first introduced in they focused on general intelligence(Shogren,2017).

By that, Demetriou, (2018) said that General Intelligence included attention control, flexibility, and working memory. Hence, the theory of mind is still a very good way to explain how people with intellectual disabilities behave. Intellectually disabled people have a hard time understanding other people's points of view, but this is not the same thing as empathy. People with intellectual challenges have a lot of empathy and are very open about how they feel. But this also depends on who they are talking to. They are more open with close family members. Even criminals with intellectual disabilities did better on empathy and theory of mind tests than criminals without intellectual disabilities (Proctor &Beail, 2007).

6. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews to explore the lived experiences of individuals who have recently transitioned careers. Qualitative research methods allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences, enabling a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The sample was purposefully selected to include a diverse range of participants who have

professionally supported children with intellectual disabilities. Participants are recruited through various channels, such as professional networks, referrals, and career support groups.

6.1 Research Design

This qualitative study employed an exploratory research approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of special needs education professionals in handling learners with intellectual disabilities. Exploratory research allowed researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, emotions, challenges, and strategies in working with this specific population, providing rich and nuanced insights into their experiences.

6.2 Data Collection

The primary data collection method for this study is semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences and allow for the emergence of unexpected themes and insights. The interviews are conducted face-to-face or through video conferencing, depending on the participants' preferences and logistical feasibility.

6.3 Population and Sample

The sample for this study was purposefully selected to include a diverse range of special education professionals with experience handling learners with intellectual disabilities. Participants are chosen based on their expertise, years of experience, and variety of educational settings. The goal is to capture a breadth of experiences and perspectives to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Participants are recruited through various channels, including special education associations, professional networks, and educational institutions specializing in intellectual disability. Recruitment efforts involve providing clear information about the study's purpose, obtaining informed consent, and addressing any concerns or questions participants may have.

The participants who take part in this study are either male or female professionals (Special Education Teachers, General Education Teachers, Psychologists, Occupational Therapists, Behavioral Therapists, Shadow Teachers, and Classroom Assistants) ranging in age from 19 to 50 years old.

6.4 Data Collection

Interviews that are only partially structured are used to collect data, and these interviews are conducted according to a procedure devised based on the research questions. The protocol includes open-ended questions to explore participants' experiences, challenges, strategies, and emotions when working with learners with intellectual disabilities. Probing and follow-up questions are used to develop deeper into specific areas of interest. Before starting the interview, to make sure that the questions are relevant to the study, the researchers consulted some experts to validate the main and probing questions. After gathering data, to justify the information given by the participants or everything that the researchers transcribed each of the participants signed a justification that proved that there's no biases and miswritten information.

6.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is employed to analyze the collected data. The thematic analysis involves identifying, coding, and analyzing patterns, themes, and categories within the dataset. The analysis process involves multiple stages, including familiarizing the data, initial coding, theme development, and refinement. Data triangulation and member-checking techniques are utilized to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

6.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines are followed throughout the study. Informed consent are obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and addressing any potential risks or benefits. Participants' privacy and confidentiality is maintained by anonymizing their identities and storing data securely. The study adheres to institutional ethical guidelines and seeks ethical approval if required.

6.7 Limitations

Certain limitations are to be considered in this research study. The sample may not represent the entire population of special education professionals working with learners with intellectual disabilities, and the findings may not be generalizable to all contexts. Furthermore, the study relies on self-reported data and individual perspectives, which may introduce potential biases. However, efforts are made to mitigate these limitations through purposeful sampling, rigorous data analysis, and a clear delineation of the study's scope and context in the reporting of findings.

7. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Professionals in the field of special education play an essential role in the process of providing educational support to students who have intellectual disabilities. Having said that, this endeavor has its fair share of obstacles. Special education professionals often encounter challenges related to inadequate resources and support. Gokool-Baurhoo, N., and Asghar, A. (2019) emphasized the lack of appropriate instructional materials and technology tools tailored to the needs of learners with intellectual disabilities. Insufficient funding, limited access to assistive devices, and a shortage of trained personnel further exacerbate the resource constraints (Lee, H., & Templeton, R., 2008).

Co-teaching: General and SPED educators

Promoting inclusive education and integrating learners with intellectual disabilities into mainstream classrooms is a priority. However, special education professionals often encounter challenges related to inadequate support for inclusion, a lack of collaboration with general education teachers, and resistance from peers. The literature highlights the need for collaborative partnerships and professional development to foster successful inclusion practices (Heyder, A., Südkamp, A., & Steinmayr, R., 2020).

In inclusive classrooms, general education math instructors and other professionals often encounter challenges in effectively meeting the unique needs of these students. One significant challenge for general education math teachers and professionals is providing differentiated instruction to accommodate the diverse learning needs of learners with intellectual disabilities. A study conducted by Chitiyo, J. (2017), suggests that adapting math content, employing multisensory teaching strategies, and using visual aids can facilitate understanding and engagement for these students. However, implementing differentiated instruction while maintaining pace with the curriculum and managing time constraints can be demanding for teachers.

On the other hand, meeting the individualized needs of learners with intellectual disabilities in math requires tailored support and modifications. General education teachers and professionals often encounter difficulties in identifying appropriate accommodations, adapting materials, and providing additional resources to enhance understanding (Winnick, J. P., & Porretta, D. L., 2016). Collaborating with special education professionals, utilizing assistive technology, and employing personalized learning plans can support the provision of individualized support (Iovannone, R. et al., 2003).

Collaboration between general education math teachers and professionals and special education professionals is crucial for effectively supporting learners with intellectual disabilities. However, challenges in communication, coordination, and workload allocation can hinder successful collaboration (Katz et al., 2018; Whitbread et al., 2019). Developing shared planning time, establishing clear roles and responsibilities, and facilitating ongoing communication can promote effective collaboration and improve student outcomes.

Communication difficulties and behavior management

Effective communication is essential for successful interactions between special education professionals and learners with intellectual disabilities. However, language and communication impairments can pose significant challenges. Studies have highlighted the need for specialized training to enhance professionals' communication skills, including the use of augmentative and alternative communication systems (Omilion-Hodges, L.M. et al., 2017; Mahoney & Perales, 2019).

Challenging behaviors often accompany intellectual disabilities, presenting a significant challenge for special education professionals. Dealing with aggression, self-injurious behavior, and disruptive conduct requires specialized knowledge and skills. Research has emphasized the importance of implementing behavior management strategies, such as positive behavior support and individualized behavior plans, to address these challenges effectively (Ivory, K. P., & Kern, L. 2022).

Moreover, there's a general tendency toward prosocial action, the association between moral identity and behavior is greater when contextual variables enhance the availability of moral scripts. The presence of classmates with disabilities in the classroom fosters settings that allow students to get to know them better, comprehend their strengths and challenges, and raise awareness of their needs. Contact with peers with disabilities can help reduce bias against individuals with impairments, enhance tolerance for them, and raise awareness of the need to assist them. As a result, such encounters might activate moral identity (Aquino et al., 2009).

Individualized instruction and curriculum adaptation

Designing and implementing individualized instruction tailored to the unique learning needs of learners with intellectual disabilities is a demanding task. Special education professionals face challenges in developing personalized education plans, adapting the curriculum, and providing differentiated instruction. The need for

ongoing professional development in instructional strategies and curriculum adaptation has been emphasized in the literature (oeyers et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2020).

8. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussion of the lived experiences of Special Education Needs (SNED) professionals. The data was gathered through qualitative interviews, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their experiences as professionals dealing with learners with intellectual disabilities. We investigated the difficulties that educators experience when teaching students with intellectual disabilities. We interviewed educators, therapists, and other professionals with expertise working with learners with intellectual disabilities and examined their responses to find common themes and trends. This section highlights the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews with professionals, their real-life situations, challenges, and rewards in dealing with learners with ID.

8.1 Communication issues - Working with students with intellectual limitations can be a particularly difficult challenge for educators. People with intellectual disabilities may struggle to acquire new information, process existing knowledge, and successfully communicate their ideas. As an outcome of this, it is critical for educators to have a solid comprehension of the difficulties that are inherent in the process of teaching people who have intellectual disabilities and to be able to devise efficient methods for overcoming these difficulties. Upon gathering the information, participant 1 said that “*I experienced different attitudes handling learners with ID than the regular learner*”. In moral identity, there’s a general tendency toward prosocial action, the association between moral identity and behavior is greater when contextual variables enhance the availability of moral scripts. The presence of classmates with disabilities in the classroom fosters settings that allow students to get to know them better, comprehend their strengths and challenges, and raise awareness of their needs. Contact with peers with disabilities can help to reduce bias against individuals with impairments, enhance tolerance for them, and raise awareness of the need to assist them. As a result, such an encounter might activate moral identity (Aquino et al., 2009).

To assist these pupils in learning effectively, teachers must be proficient in alternate communication approaches such as sign language or visual aids. This idea is taken from the answer of participants who give their time for an interview.

P 2: “Well with their condition o situation as i’ve said it takes time and patience knowing that they have difficulty in learning ahhh especially on ahhh retaining the lessons that given to them so as a teacher we have to established of course the mastery so to attain mastery we need to ahhh give time to the child to be able to familiarize the lessons, it means that we have to do it then and then so that they will fully understand what is the lesson all about

Furthermore, communication issues among professionals dealing with learners with ID have a negative impact not only on their students but also on the community in which they live, the parents of the learners, and other coworkers.

P 3: “ Kanang ilang behavior sakong mga learner, usahay na dili nako macontrol lalo na tong dagko na kaayo. Ahhhh kanang sa ilang mga lessons makaadjust man ko ,naa man tay accomodation modification d ba...ahhhmmm tawag ana , sa behaviour jud cguro kasi ako right now na kuan sya nagamodule, everytime magface to face or magklase mi , mahurot among time sa pagcontain sa iyang emotion kasi kung naa syay gusto regardless bahala ka diha, bisan unsa iyang gusto wala , basta lagpot lage akong earrings, sipa diri sipa didto. Although naa iyang mama, gukod diri gukod didto seguro naulaw iyang mama, mam trabaho na namo mam part na samong trabaho kanang kihanglan nako assistant kay basta di nako sya makuan , 7 years old sya, ASD sya , na assess ang bata naa syay potential kato lang jud iyang behavior, sa papa ra nya maminaw. Isa pa ang budget jud na gikan sa government, atleast karon makita nako na naa nay gamay sila nabuhat pero lahi ra jud ai pag tutukan sila sa mga experts na kanang mafford pod nila .

Additionally, a participant said "ahmmm,thank you for that question no . Ahmm. I am happy to handle that kind of of children so ahh ahh di sya sayon pero happy ko na magtudlo sa ilaha, makafeel kog care, then then mao na sya na ganahan ko maghandle sa ilaha (Ahmm. I am happy to handle that kind of child so ahh ahh it's not easy but I'm happy to teach them, I can feel care, then that's why I like to handle them).

In line with this, P2 states that:

“Well ahh handling learners especially with Intellectual Disability is not an easy task ahhh it takes patience to to teach them ahhh to learn things that might help them to be ahmm independent in our society.”

It is supported by P3;

“ Magbisaya rako ha kay di ko hawd magenglish. Aahhh as teacher kanang kuan ko kanang ahh , challenge as well contented kay naa koy nakita na improvement sakong studyante. Sa una pagstart nako sa ilaha di pa sila kabalo mosounds pero karon nagassess ko sa ilaha sa oral lang sa reading nalipay ko kay nakabasa na sila bisan simple word , bisan teo syllables palang like mata , lata ana lang mam.

8.2 Insufficient Assessment and Facilities

Learners with IDs have major cognitive function limits (lack of intellectual functioning; learning limitations) as well as difficulties in adaptive behavior skills such as social skills and self-care abilities (Okyer, Aldersey, & Lysaght, 2019). Students with intellectual disabilities might need to be evaluated and assessed using different approaches that are more suited to their capabilities. Professionals SNED must have the ability to choose and deliver appropriate assessments and use the results to inform instruction and track learners' development. It

is essential for children with intellectual impairments to feel both comfortable and included that the facilities they use are accessible and can accommodate their needs. Accessibility for people who use wheelchairs, accessible restrooms, classrooms that are hospitable to those with sensory disorders, and appropriate assistive technology are all examples of this. Lacking facilities may affect also the learner's performance especially if their cases really need physical assistance. According to the participants, there are a lot of children in the community who are learners with an intellectual disability who do not receive proper learning and understanding because of a lack of assessments. Most of these learners prefer to stay at home because they are not being assessed.

This concept is linked to the responses from P1 who expresses her lived experiences:

P 3: "As a teacher, I experienced different attitudes in handling learners with ID than the regular learner."

P 2: "Well with their condition o situation as i've said it takes time and patience knowing that they have difficulty in learning ahhh especifically on ahhh retaining the lessons that given to them so as a teacher we have to established of course the mastery so to attain mastery we need to ahhh give time to the child to be able to familiarize the lessons, it means that we have to do it then and then so that they will fully understand what is the lesson all about"

9. RECOMMENDATION

The study anchored the 1 Occupational therapist, 1 psychologist, 1 general education teacher, 1 SNED teacher, 1 behavioural therapist in handling learners with intellectual disability in are in Davao Region. Their insights, as well as their opinions, may not represent the entire population of professionals handling intellectually disability learners in the region. Same with the interviews it only involved the participating professionals and interview questions were validated by experts. Therefore, the following recommendations are being presented:

Future research that is related on a broader population and across several institutions, as well as an examination of the opinions of the experts who deal with intellectual disability, may be taken into consideration. These may provide a significant justification for why the difficulties mentioned by the participants were frequently encountered by them. Government and corporate organizations may be able to elaborate by using specific examples and scenarios to paint a clearer picture of the overall situation. Future studies may examine the availability of programs, interventions, and methods that might encounter difficulties during the implementation stages. Facilities or a lack of labor force could be specific considerations to be considered.

Upcoming studies may consider looking into the most relevant training programs, interventions, and strategies that can be offered to the professionals handling learners with intellectual disabilities before their

deployment and while being assigned. These could be in the areas of psychology, therapy, and legal education which will help them get ready for a new challenge in their line of work.

Furthermore, a study on the best viable deployment plan or approach could also be of interest to future scholars. This could be a technique or instrument that considerably expands how professionals handle intellectual disability students' selection and preparedness for assignments at the place of learning. Once considered, the findings of the recommended studies may aid in improving the overall operation of inclusive education in schools and the effectiveness of professionals working with students with intellectual disabilities, which is the primary goal of such a program in our country's education department.

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