

" STEPPING INTO THE FUTURE: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION TEACHERS HANDLING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN TRANSITION EDUCATION"

ROSA MHEA V. ABAD^a, BRYAN L. CANCIO^b

^arosamhea.abad@hcdc.edu.ph, ^bbryan.cancio@hcdc.edu.ph

^aGraduate School Student, Mati, Davao Oriental, Philippines, ^bProfessor, Holy Cross of Davao College

Abstract

Students with disabilities often face systemic barriers during their transition from school to employment, particularly within limited-resource educational settings. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of special needs education teachers in supporting students with disabilities as they prepare for employment through transition education. The study is significant as it provided insight into the challenges and strategies of teachers that can inform inclusive transition policies and programs. The researcher used phenomenological research design, data were gathered from nine purposively selected special needs education teachers through focus group discussions and analyzed using Colaizzi's analysis method. The findings revealed three major themes: (1) implementation of practical and school-based vocational practices despite facility limitations; (2) strong teacher-family collaboration and emerging in-school employment initiatives, although external employer engagement remains limited; and (3) the persistence of societal stigma, restrictive policies, and cultural beliefs that hinder student inclusion in the workforce. These experiences reflect the teachers' dedication but also highlight the systemic gaps in inclusive employment pathways. In conclusion, while teachers maximize available resources and support systems, greater institutional and policy support is needed. It is recommended that schools invest in facilities, form multidisciplinary teams, strengthen employer partnerships, and revise rigid job qualification standards to promote inclusive and sustainable transition programs.

Keywords: Transition education, special needs education, disability employment, teacher experiences, inclusive practices

1. Introduction

The global transition from school to employment for students with disabilities remains a significant challenge (Esead & Diale, 2023). Special education (SPED) teachers play a crucial role in this process, yet they often face systemic barriers that hinder effective transition planning (Allam & Martin, 2021). These barriers include inadequate resources, limited professional development, and insufficient collaboration with employers contribute to the persistently low employment rates among individuals with disabilities worldwide (Morwane et al., 2021).

Various countries have documented similar issues. In Sweden, a study highlighted those special needs education teachers in upper-secondary schools faced challenges in implementing workplace-based learning (WBL) initiatives, which are crucial for preparing students with intellectual disabilities for employment (Ineland et al., 2021). In Tanzania, research indicated that students with intellectual disabilities transitioning from primary to secondary school experienced difficulties due to a lack of tailored support and resources (Patrick & Umeodum, 2024). In the United States, special educators reported that transitioning students with disabilities from high school to the community has been an area of focus, yet challenges persist in supporting the independence of this population (Goeagan et al., 2024).

In the Philippines, SPED teachers also encounter obstacles in facilitating the transition to employment for students with disabilities. A study by Percella et al., (2023) focusing on SPED teachers working with students with hearing impairment revealed that these educators employed various instructional strategies, such as the use of visual aids and sign language immersion, to equip students with necessary employment skills. However, the

effectiveness of these strategies is often limited by systemic issues, including inadequate training and support. Another study by De Arao and Fontanilla (2024) in Camarines Norte Division highlighted concerns regarding the competence of SPED teachers in implementing transition programs, pointing to a need for enhanced professional development and resources.

The urgency to address these challenges is underscored by the significant gap between the skills students with disabilities acquire in school and the demands of the labor market. This disconnect not only hampers the employment prospects of these individuals but also places additional strain on SPED teachers striving to bridge this gap without adequate support. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to provide SPED teachers with the necessary training, resources, and collaborative opportunities to effectively prepare students with disabilities for successful employment transitions.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study investigated the lived experiences of Special Needs Education Teachers having Students with Disabilities in Transition Education in SPED Center City of Mati, Davao Oriental, Philippines for the school year 2025-2026.

Specifically, it seeks answers to the following sub-questions:

1. What are the experiences of special needs education teachers in supporting students with disabilities in their transition to employment within the school environment?
2. What are the experiences of special needs education teachers in navigating relationships and collaboration with families, employers, and other institutions involved in transition education?
3. What are the experiences of special needs education teachers in responding to external influences such as policies, societal expectations, and cultural attitudes toward the employment of individuals with disabilities?

1.2 Theoretical Lens

This study anchored in Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), views human development as influenced by a complex system of relationships and environments that interact across multiple levels. It emphasizes that an individual's experiences—such as those of students with disabilities transitioning to employment—are shaped not just by their immediate surroundings but also by broader institutional, societal, and cultural contexts, social, and policy environments.

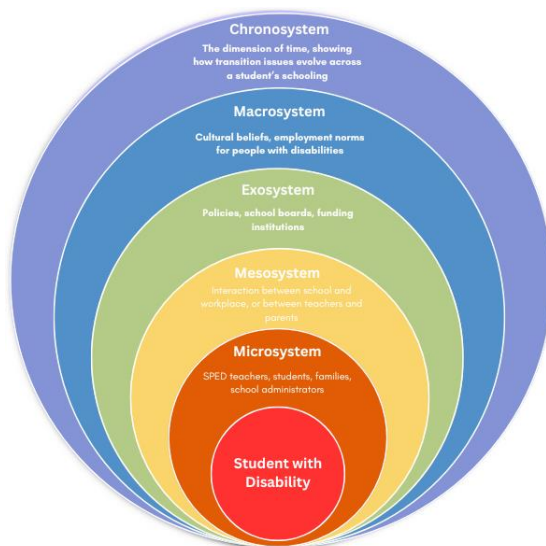


Figure 1. IPO Conceptual Framework of the Study

2. Method

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of special needs education teachers who handle students with disabilities in transition education. This research design is particularly suited for this research as it emphasizes the participants' personal perceptions and the essence of their experiences rather than seeking statistical generalization (Creswell et al., 2003; Neubauer et al., 2019). This qualitative approach allowed the researchers to investigate how these teachers make sense of their roles in equipping learners with vocational, academic, and self-help skills necessary for future employment and independence. According to Tenny et al. (2022), phenomenological research aimed to understand the "how" and "why" of human experiences, making it suitable for uncovering insights into complex educational contexts.

The research was conducted in Mati City, specifically at the Special Education Center in Mati Central, Davao Oriental, Philippines. This school provides inclusive and special class for learners with special needs; it also provides an ideal environment for examining the unique challenges and strategies involved in transition education. The study involved nine (9) special needs education teachers, selected through purposive sampling, which involves choosing individuals who meet specific criteria relevant to the research purpose (Etikan, 2016). Inclusion criteria include: (a) the participants must be a special needs education teacher, (b) the participants must handle students with disabilities referred for transition education, and (c) the participants have a direct teaching responsibilities related to vocational, academic, and self-help skills. On the other hand, teachers who are not SPED specialists or who lack direct involvement in transition education were excluded. This deliberate selection ensures that participants can provide meaningful insights aligned with the study's objectives.

For data collection, the researchers used focus group discussions (FGDs) guided by a semi-structured interview tool consisting of ten probing questions. FGDs are effective in exploring social issues in depth and gathering diverse viewpoints from purposefully selected individuals (Nyumba et al., 2018). The interview guide was reviewed and validated by a panel of three experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research goals. Before data collection, formal approvals were sought from the Society for Moral Integrity and Legal Ethics (SMILE), the Division of Mati City, and the school principal. Participants were provided with complete information about the study, and written informed consent were obtained to uphold voluntary participation and ethical transparency.

In terms of data analysis, the study followed Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method, which involved familiarization with the data, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and creating a rich description of the participants' shared experiences. The researchers practiced bracketing to minimize bias and maintain neutrality during the analysis process. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted by presenting interpreted data to participants for validation. Throughout the study, ethical standards were upheld in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and the ethical guidelines established by SMILE. These measures guaranteed confidentiality, protect participants' rights, and promote respectful engagement, ensuring the study's findings contribute meaningfully to transition education practices and policy development.

3. Results and Discussion

This chapter elaborates the themes and subthemes of this study.

Experiences of SNED Teachers on Instructional Practices and Support Strategies

Use of Real-World and Practical Activities. As we interviewed the participants who are Special education teachers, they shared that they prioritized embedding functional, real-world tasks into classroom instruction to develop foundational work-related skills. Research has shown that using authentic materials such as play money or real currency can significantly improve functional math and money - management skills among students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Hina & Misbah, 2024). These activities not only bridge academic concepts to everyday tasks but also help students anticipate the requirements of future employment settings.

"As a special education teacher nga naga handle ug mga students sa transition education, naga provide ko ug real world and practical activities like counting and changing through play money or real money to develop their mathematical skills and to ready them for possible employment and independence." IDI5

Exposure to School-Based Vocational Activities. These teachers who handle learners with special needs in the transition education, integrated school-based vocational experiences such as working in the canteen or participating in simple baking projects to simulate workplace routines. Studies on work-based learning indicate that when students with disabilities engage in campus - based enterprises, they gain critical job-readiness skills, improve social communication, and develop task persistence (Bellman et al., 2014).

"Usahay gina expose namo sila sa amoang school canteen, gina pa kita namo unsaon pag dawat sa mga ngapamalit ug sa classroom usahay gina tudloan namo sila mag bake ug simple lang na recipe." IDI1

Lack of Facilities and Professional Support. The participants shared that despite of these instructional innovations, teachers noted the insufficient facilities and an absence of a multidisciplinary support team. The literature suggests that inadequate physical resources and limited access to specialized personnel (e.g., occupational therapists, vocational counselors) hinder the implementation of robust transition programs (Turner et al., 2017). Without tailored workstations, adaptive tools, or collaboration with allied professionals, teachers feel constrained in their ability to individualize training (Vali, 2023).

"I believe kulang pajud kaayo ang amoang mga facilities as well as sa multidisciplinary team nga maoy mag cater sa educational needs amoang mga bata. That is why dili pa kaayo in ana ka progressive amoang transition education." IDI3

Experiences of SNED teacher on the Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement

Supportive and Open Communication with Families. As we deepened the interview, the participants describe a strong connection with families who are actively engaged in their child's progress. Research confirms that consistent, two - way communication between school and home enhances student outcomes in transition programs; parental involvement is linked to higher levels of student self - advocacy and sustained work

behaviors (Eden et al., 2024). When parents visit to pick up their children, teachers seize the opportunity to report on achievements, discuss challenges, and align home - based practice with school - based goals (Ainscow, 2020).

"Ma happy sad ko kay ang uban nga mga ginikanan kay supportive and everytime nga ginasundo nila ilahang mga bata, naa koy time to talk with them and tell their progress." IDI9

Difficulty Coordinating with Employers. The researchers felt a sense of empathy regarding the teachers' reports on the challenges in establishing relationships with local employers, citing rigid job qualifications that frequently exclude students with disabilities. Research indicates that employer reluctance often stems from misconceptions about productivity and a lack of understanding regarding reasonable accommodations (Olsen, 2022).

"Nowadays, naga lisod pami ug coordinate sa mga possible employers kay tungod sa mga qualifications nga gina set sa mga employers but we are looking sa mga employers nga naga embrace ug inclusivity." IDI3

School-Based Employment Initiatives. Some teachers shared that their school has begun to employ students with disabilities in campus roles, and they are optimistic about expanding these initiatives. Studies on school - based work placements demonstrate that on - campus employment can serve as an effective stepping - stone, providing a structured support network and reducing transportation barriers (Alpaydın & Kültür, 2022).

"As of now, naa mi na employ diria sa amoang school and we are hoping na ma istorya pa ang amoang principal nga mag employ pa ug mga students with disability dria sa amoang school." IDI6

Experiences of SNED teachers on External Influences on Transition Education

Restrictive Policy Standards. As we listened to the sentiments of the teachers, the concerns of national and school-level policies establish job qualifications are too stringent for many students with disabilities. Literature on policy implementation in special education suggests that while mandates (e.g., IDEA, 2004) promote inclusion, they often lack clear guidelines for post-school employment qualifications, resulting in inconsistent application (Connolly, 2023).

"I am hoping na unta ipa baba nila ang mga job qualifications para ma employ ang amoang mga students with disability." IDI8

Societal Misconceptions and Doubts. Participants note that in their community, awareness regarding the capabilities of individuals with disabilities—especially in employment contexts—remains limited. Empirical studies indicate that negative societal attitudes and community stigma can significantly influence teacher expectations, student self - perception, and hiring decisions (Leng et al., 2025).

"Diria sa amoang community, dili pa kaayo in ana ka spread ang awareness sa mga tao in terms sa students with disabilities lalo na pag ma employ na sila. Naay uban nga mag duha duha ug pa assist but if they know how dedicated they are. I know nga ma accept na nila." IDI2

Challenging Cultural Norms. Cultural expectations in the local context often relegate persons with disabilities to the home, reinforcing dependency rather than independence. Qualitative research highlights that deep-rooted cultural beliefs about disability can limit community support for transition programs (Saran et al., 2021). Teachers in this study actively counter such norms by intentionally fostering independence through targeted instruction and community engagement (Zitha et al., 2023).

"Ang norm sa amoa kay pag naa kay disability naa raka sa balay but through the initiative of all the people working in SPED, gina break namo to and prepare these individuals to prepare them for independence." IDI7

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study revealed that special needs education teachers utilized practical, real-world activities and school-based vocational experiences to develop work-related skills among students with disabilities, demonstrating their commitment to fostering independence despite systemic constraints. However, teachers face significant challenges due to limited facilities, inadequate multidisciplinary support, restrictive policy standards, and pervasive cultural and societal barriers. While collaboration with supportive families and emerging on-campus employment initiatives reflect positive strides, difficulties engaging external employers and shifting community attitudes underscore the need for more robust, systemic support to ensure that transition education effectively prepares students for meaningful employment.

Recommendation

It is recommended that schools and local authorities should invest in specialized facilities and establish multidisciplinary teams including vocational counselors, occupational therapists, and transition specialists to provide comprehensive support for students with disabilities. Strengthening partnerships with employers through inclusive-hiring incentives, employer education, and community awareness campaigns can help reduce workplace barriers. Additionally, ongoing professional development should be offered to teachers and families to address social misconceptions and build capacity for effective transition planning. Finally, policymakers should revise job qualification standards to be more flexible and culturally responsive, ensuring that transition education programs holistically support students with disabilities toward sustainable employment and community integration.

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