

"ECHOES OF AN EMPTY SEAT: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS ON THE CHRONIC TRUANCY OF LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION" 167

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Abstract

The problem of chronic absenteeism among learners with special needs poses significant challenges for general education teachers in inclusive classroom settings. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of general education teachers in addressing the classroom, familial, and societal impacts of chronic absenteeism among learners with special needs in the inclusive classroom. The study was significant in informing inclusive education practices and policy reforms that support teacher overall well-being and learner attendance. Employing a phenomenological design, the study purposively selected nine general education teachers from SPED Center in Mati City, with data gathered through semi-structured and in-depth interviews. The findings of this study revealed three major themes: instructional disruptions and differentiated demands at the classroom level; weak family collaboration and teacher-initiated interventions at the institutional level; and stigma, limited policy support, and post-pandemic attendance issues at the societal level. Teachers expressed their emotional strain, increased workload, and a challenge in addressing these challenges. In conclusion, chronic absenteeism requires multi-level, systemic support beyond the individual teacher. It is recommended that school should implement structured attendance support systems, strengthen home-school collaboration, and enhance teacher training and inclusive education policies.

Keywords: Chronic absenteeism, Inclusive education, Special needs learners, General education teachers, Ecological systems theory

1. Introduction

Chronic absenteeism among learners with special needs in mainstream classrooms has become a significant global concern, affecting both educational equity and inclusive practices. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of school days in an academic year, disproportionately impacts learners with special needs, threatening their academic progress and social integration (Bundshuh et al. 2021).

Several international studies highlight the prevalence of chronic absenteeism among learners with special needs in various national contexts. In the United States, Stromberg et al., (2022) found that students with disabilities are significantly more likely to be chronically absent compared to their typically developing peers, which exacerbates learning gaps. In the United Kingdom, a study by Lereya et al., (2022) revealed that learners with special educational needs (SEN) have consistently higher absence rates across all school levels. Similarly, in Colombia, research by Carrillo-Sierra et al., (2025) reported that students with disabilities exhibit higher absenteeism due to systemic barriers within inclusive classrooms, signaling a need for more adaptive school environments and policies. These studies underscore that chronic absenteeism is not an isolated or localized issue but a persistent challenge across diverse educational systems.

In the Philippine context, the issue of absenteeism among learners with special needs in inclusive settings is increasingly evident, though underexplored. The Department of Education (DepEd) recognizes the implementation of inclusive education through policies such as DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009; however, actual classroom practices reveal difficulties in sustaining learner engagement and attendance. A study by Nuñez and Rosales Aling (2021) reported irregular attendance as a recurring issue among children with disabilities in public schools, which impedes inclusive education goals. Furthermore, recent findings by Potane and Recla (2024)

identified absenteeism as one of the critical challenges faced by general education teachers, who are often unprepared to address the specific needs of learners with disabilities within large, diverse classrooms.

The urgency of this study lies in addressing a significant research gap regarding how general education teachers manage the chronic absenteeism of learners with special needs in mainstream classes. While policies promoting inclusion are well-intentioned, there is limited empirical literature—especially in the Philippine setting—that captures the lived experiences and practical difficulties teachers face related to absenteeism. This gap hampers the development of effective interventions and professional support systems. Investigating this problem is essential to inform policy adjustments and equip educators with strategies to foster consistent attendance and engagement among all learners, thereby strengthening the country's commitment to inclusive education.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to explore the experiences of general education teachers on the chronic truancy of learners with special needs in the inclusive classroom.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following sub-problems:

1. What are the experiences of general education teachers in managing the chronic truancy of learners with special needs in the inclusive classroom?
2. What are the experiences of general education teachers in engaging with families and the broader school community to address chronic absenteeism of learners with special needs?
3. What are the experiences of general education teachers in navigating societal and systemic influences that affect the school attendance of learners with special needs?

1.2 Theoretical Lens

This study anchored in the Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals and their surrounding environments, organized into multiple layers: the microsystem (immediate relationships like family and school), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), exosystem (indirect influences such as local education policies), macrosystem (cultural and societal norms), and chronosystem (changes over time). This theory is highly suited in understanding the experiences of general education teachers dealing with the chronic absenteeism of learners with special needs in inclusive classrooms, as it situates absenteeism not solely within the child's personal or behavioral challenges but as an outcome of complex, interrelated environmental factors. Teachers' perspectives reveal how classroom dynamics (microsystem), parent-teacher coordination (mesosystem), school leadership and support services (exosystem), and broader societal attitudes toward disability and inclusion (macrosystem) all influence attendance patterns. Anchoring the study on this theory enables a comprehensive understanding of how multiple ecological layers contribute to chronic absenteeism, highlighting the need for systemic and multi-level interventions in support of inclusive education.

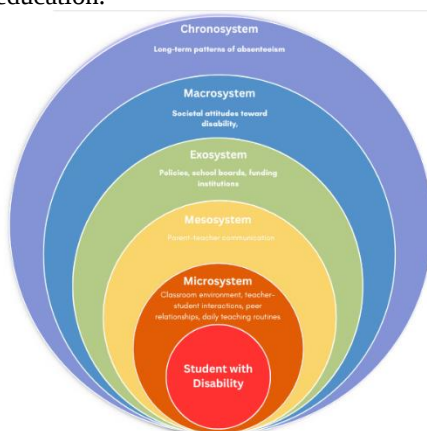


Figure 1. IPO Conceptual Framework of the Study

2. Method

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of general education teachers dealing the chronic absenteeism of learners with special needs in an inclusive classroom. This design was chosen as it allowed the researcher to gain in-depth insights into the meanings and understandings that teachers attach to their experiences, as emphasized by Moustakas (1994), who stated that phenomenology is effective for studying individuals' subjective experiences. Additionally, Sokolowski (1999) highlighted that phenomenological research is method in which researchers focus on studying human experiences, including the way people conceptualize their lived, shared experiences. Given that absenteeism is a complex and deeply personal issue, particularly within the context of inclusive education, this design was most suitable to capture the emotional, psychological, and professional realities encountered by general education teachers.

The participants of the study were (9) nine general education teachers of SPED Center in Mati City, Davao Oriental. The researcher utilized purposive sampling to deliberately select individuals who had direct experience with teaching learners with special needs in an inclusive setting. As Palinkas et al. (2015) emphasized, purposive sampling is ideal in qualitative research when the objective is to gain insights from individuals who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. The inclusion criteria were: (1) general education teachers with at least one year of experience handling mainstream classes with learners with special needs, and (2) those currently teaching at the SPED Center in Mati City. On the other hand, teachers who had no prior experience with learners with special needs or were newly deployed (less than one academic year) were excluded from the study to ensure depth and consistency of insight.

This study used semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews as primary data collection instruments. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to guide the conversation through pre-established questions while also offering flexibility to probe deeper into relevant experiences as they emerged. This method is supported by Ruslin et al. (2022), who stated that semi-structured interviews are ideal for exploring participants' perceptions while maintaining a balance between focused inquiry and open-ended responses. The interview guide questions consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about the teachers' challenges, coping strategies, and observations related to chronic absenteeism.

For data collection, the researcher personally conducted the interviews in a conducive and friendly location within the school premises and through online platforms, depending on participant availability and health protocols. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Follow-up questions were used when necessary to ensure clarity and depth of responses. The interviews were conducted in English, Filipino, Bisaya, depending on the comfort of the participant, and were later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) method of thematic analysis, which involved a seven-step process. The researcher immersed herself in the data by reading the transcripts multiple times to gain a holistic understanding. Significant statements were extracted and formulated into meanings, which were then clustered into themes. These themes were validated by referring back to the original transcripts and, when necessary, through participant validation. The final step involved the creation of a comprehensive description of the phenomenon based on emerging themes. The researcher actively engaged in all stages of analysis to ensure accuracy, reflexivity, and consistency with the participants' true experiences.

This study strictly adhered to ethical considerations. Approval was obtained from the appropriate ethics review board and the Schools Division Office. Participants were provided with informed consent forms, clearly outlining the purpose of the study, their rights, and the voluntary nature of participation. Confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonyms, securely storing digital files, and limiting access to data. The study was conducted in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and upheld principles of respect, beneficence, and non-maleficence throughout the research process.

3. Results and Discussion

This chapter elaborates the themes and subthemes of this study.

Experiences of Teachers on the Classroom Management and Instructional Impact

Disruption in Instructional Flow. During my interview with general education teachers, they expressed their deep concern over how chronic absenteeism disrupted their instructional planning and lesson continuity. These disruptions often led to added stress as they had to adjust lesson pacing and backtrack to accommodate learners with special needs. This sense of disruption is consistent with research by Ansari and Pianta, 2019, which emphasizes that absenteeism leads to learning loss and challenges classroom rhythm, especially for students with additional learning needs.

“As a teacher, I was very worried because the learner was behind from the current lesson and I need to compile those past activities so that when the time that the learner will be present, he/she might cope with the lesson.” IDI4

Differentiated Instructional Demands. Throughout the interview, the participants echoed the need to create two sets of instructional activities: one for regularly attending students and another for absentees, which added significantly to their workload. This differentiated effort, though intended to support inclusion, often resulted in feelings of exhaustion. According to Lübke et al., (2021), teachers serving inclusive classrooms must develop customized strategies for students who miss substantial school time, which places a heavy cognitive and emotional toll on educators.

“It is also a challenge to reintegrate them to the regular class, that why I gave different activities for the regular class and for my mainstream learner.” IDI5

Personal Time Investment and Remediation. Listening to the story of the participants, they shared that they used personal time after class to offer remedial sessions, highlighting their commitment but also the unsustainable demand placed upon them. This aligns with the findings of Bundshuh et al. (2021), which emphasize that effective support for chronically absent students requires additional interventions — a task often absorbed by individual teachers when systemic support is lacking.

“As much as possible, naga gahin kog time after class or should we say remedial class para maka habol ang bata nga sgeg absent.” IDI2

Experiences of Teachers on the Family Engagement and Institutional Response

Communication Challenges with Parents. As the participants deepened their shared experiences, they expressed a sense frustration over the lack of effective communication and cooperation from parents of chronically absent learners. Despite regular reminders, teachers often received excuses or were unable to reach parents at all. This finding reflects what Kearney et al., (2023) noted—that chronic absenteeism is often reinforced by weak home-school communication channels, especially when parents do not prioritize attendance or are unresponsive.

“Always ko naga remind sa parents but daghan kaayog alibi, wala daw pamasah, gilaayan daw ang bata nga musulod ug usahay dili ma contact ang parents.” IDI2

Teacher-Led Home Interventions. The participants pointed out the absence of strong institutional support, teachers themselves conducted home visits to understand the reasons behind a student’s repeated absences. This proactive approach, though admirable, can lead to teacher burnout. According to Cook et al., (2017), home visits are considered a best practice for reducing chronic absenteeism but require administrative coordination to be sustainable and safe for educators.

“As what I experienced, naga home visit ko sa mga students if frequent najud ang absent to check if naa ba problem or what.” IDI6

Lack of Parental Cooperation. As the researcher talked with the participants, the researcher sensed a sense of helplessness of general education teachers especiall when parents showed apathy or refused to collaborate with them. Some parents did not respond to calls or showed no interest in addressing their child’s absenteeism. This aligns with Lenhoffe et al., (2020), which underscores that improving student attendance is nearly impossible without engaged, cooperative families.

“Mag lisod jud mi usahay pag contact sa mga parents kay ang uban uncooperative kaayo. Although imuhang gusto kay kaayohan naa jud uban parents nga dili jud mu cooperate.” IDI2

Experiences of Teachers on the Societal and Systemic Influences on Attendance

Stigma and Social Misunderstanding. As the researcher deepened the interview, they shared that even they put all their efforts in fostering inclusion in the classroom, learners with special needs still experienced social exclusion and bullying from peers, often stemming from community ignorance. This discouraged attendance and demotivated learners. These findings are align to the study of Jansen-van Vuuren and Aldersey (2020), which highlights that social stigma remains a significant barrier to inclusive education worldwide.

“As part of the teacher I encouraged them na mag participate ug gina appreciate ilahang presence pero mapansin nako nga evident gihapon ang bullying or misunderstanding from the people nga dili aware sa condition sa bata. Isa pud siguro ni nga rason ngano unmotivated ang mata.” IDI1

Supplementary Measures as Policy Response. Some participants noted that although schools had attendance-monitoring systems and policies to provide supplementary materials, the actual burden of follow-

through fell on the teachers. These narratives are supported by the study of Teixeira (2023), which recommends policy revisions to shift the responsibility from individuals to system-wide efforts involving attendance teams and administrative support.

“Naa jud mi monitoring permi sa learners nga in ana ug kaso. Naga hatag meg supplementary materials to be worked at home para maka habol jud ang bata.” IDI4

Post-Pandemic Attendance Patterns. Some of the teachers noticed minor improvements in attendance after the COVID-19 pandemic, however, absenteeism among learners with special needs remained a lingering issue, especially regarding academic regression in reading and writing. This resonates with data from Namkung et al., (2022), which notes that post-pandemic absenteeism continues to disproportionately affect students with disabilities, exacerbating existing inequities.

“Naay changes gamay but still evident gihapon ang pag sgeg absent sa akoang pupil nga gi mainstream sa akoo. Maong daghan kaayo problema sa ilahang reading ug writing.” IDI6

Conclusion

This study concluded that chronic absenteeism among learners with special needs presents significant challenges for general education teachers in inclusive classrooms. Anchored in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, the findings revealed that at the microsystem level, teachers grapple with disrupted instruction, the need for differentiated strategies, and emotional stress. At the mesosystem and exosystem levels, weak collaboration with families and insufficient institutional support exacerbates these difficulties. At the macrosystem and chronosystem levels, societal stigma, cultural misconceptions about disability, and limited policy implementation continue to hinder consistent school attendance. These interconnected challenges reflect the complexity of the issue and highlight the pressing need for holistic, systemic responses rather than relying solely on individual teacher efforts.

Recommendation

Based on the study’s findings, it is recommended that schools implement a structured attendance support mechanism and monitoring that actively involve parents, SPED coordinators, and school administrators. Schools should also institutionalize regular professional development sessions focused on inclusive classroom management, remedial instruction, and family engagement strategies. In addition, stronger enforcement and refinement of inclusive education policies are needed at both the local and national levels. Finally, sustained community awareness initiatives should be conducted to combat stigma and build a culture that values the educational rights and inclusion of learners with special needs. These steps are crucial in ensuring that every child, regardless of ability, has equal access to quality education.

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