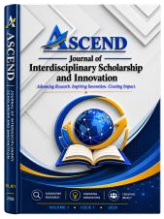
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BOUNDED BY LOVE, DRIVEN BY VOCATION: EXPLORING THE JOURNEY OF SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION (SNED) TEACHERS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN PANGASINAN

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Abstract. This qualitative phenomenological design examined the lived experiences of public-school Special Needs Education (SNED) teachers in Pangasinan, Philippines. Although national and international policies promote inclusive education, this manuscript documents less about how teachers across provincial school divisions adapt instruction, respond to implementation barriers, cope with professional demands, and interpret their work. Fifteen public-school SNED teachers with at least five years of special needs education teaching experience were recruited through snowball sampling. The researchers gathered data through semi-structured, in-depth storytelling interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Participants consented to audio recording, and the researchers used member checking to verify the accuracy of transcribed narratives. The researchers analyzed the data using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method. The researchers identified four themes: tailoring instruction to individual learner profiles; navigating systemic and environmental obstacles; cultivating resilience and peer collaboration; and translating field experience into educational growth. Across these themes, participants described individualized goal-setting, differentiated instruction, flexible accommodations, and alternative assessment. They also reported challenges involving limited specialized materials, inadequate assistive technology, curriculum adaptation, workload, and time constraints. Coping practices included patience, emotional regulation, collaboration with colleagues and parents, and motivation drawn from learner progress. The findings suggest that teachers' efforts matter but cannot replace adequate institutional support. Because the study used a small, non-probability sample, the findings offer contextual insight rather than conclusions for the broader population. The study concludes that school- and division-level support, relevant professional development, accessible instructional resources, and collaborative systems should accompany teachers' commitment to inclusive practice. Further research should examine how these supports shape classroom practices and learner progress over time.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, inclusive education, phenomenology, Special Needs Education (SNED), teacher resilience

Introduction

Inclusive education has become a global priority to ensure all learners, regardless of disability, learning difficulty, or other forms of diversity, have equitable access to quality education. In fact, the concept ensures all students have equal access and participation in class, regardless of their characteristics, fostering diversity and individuality (De Borba et al., 2024). The principle of inclusion rests on the recognition that education is a fundamental human right and that

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schools must meet learners' diverse needs through flexible curricula, appropriate instructional strategies, and supportive learning environments. The adoption of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education marked a significant milestone in promoting inclusive education by advocating that, whenever possible, all children, including those with disabilities and special educational needs, should learn together in regular schools (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Statement emphasized that educational systems must accommodate learner diversity and foster participation for all students.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) further strengthened the global commitment to inclusive education, particularly Article 24, which recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to inclusive education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) reinforced this commitment by calling for inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. UNESCO emphasizes that inclusion is not limited to placing learners with disabilities in regular classrooms; it also involves transforming educational systems to remove barriers to participation and learning while ensuring every learner is valued and supported.

Despite substantial advances in policy development, many countries still struggle to implement inclusive education. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report highlighted persistent barriers to inclusion, including inadequate teacher support, insufficient resources, limited accessibility, weak institutional capacity, and inconsistencies between policy intentions and classroom realities. The report also noted that many education systems still struggle to provide teachers with the training, resources, and support needed to address diverse learner needs effectively. These findings underscore teachers' critical role in translating inclusive education policies into meaningful classroom practice.

Teachers serve as the primary agents of inclusive education implementation. Effective implementation requires adequate professional learning, resources, training, collaboration, and connections (Chow et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2020). Their responsibilities extend beyond content delivery to include adapting curriculum, providing individualized instruction, modifying assessments, managing classrooms, and collaborating with families and support professionals. Research consistently demonstrates that effective inclusive education depends largely on teachers' knowledge, attitudes, competencies, and access to professional and institutional support. However, special education and inclusive education teachers often face heavy workloads, limited training opportunities, insufficient instructional materials, inadequate assistive technologies, and rising expectations for individualized learner support (Hornby & Kauffman, 2021).

Within the Philippine context, inclusive education has gained increased attention through policy reforms and legislative initiatives. Republic Act No. 11650, otherwise known as the Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities in Support of Inclusive Education Act, institutionalized the State's commitment to ensuring equitable access to education for learners with disabilities. The law mandates support systems, inclusive learning resource centers, and coordinated services to address the educational needs of learners with disabilities while promoting their participation in mainstream educational settings.

Complementing this legislation, the Department of Education issued DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021, which provides policy guidelines for delivering educational programs and services for learners with disabilities. The policy underscores the importance of learner-centered instruction,

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Volume 2 | Issue 2 | November | 2026

individualized educational planning, curriculum adaptation, and collaborative support mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation in education. While these policy measures mark substantial progress toward inclusive education, implementing them requires teachers to navigate complex instructional and organizational demands. Consequently, understanding teachers' experiences becomes essential for evaluating how inclusive education policies are enacted in practice.

Empirical studies in the Philippine setting show that special education teachers continue to face significant challenges in their professional practice. Allam and Martin (2021), in their qualitative study involving SPED teachers in Isabela, found that teachers struggled to identify individual learner needs, select appropriate instructional strategies, obtain adequate instructional materials, and access professional development opportunities. Their findings further showed that many teachers perceived themselves as insufficiently prepared to address the diverse needs of learners with disabilities due to limited specialized training and institutional support. Resource constraints, inadequate facilities, and insufficient stakeholder involvement also emerged as persistent concerns affecting educational service delivery.

Similarly, studies examining special education teachers' experiences emphasize the importance of resilience, collaboration, and adaptive practices in addressing professional challenges. Teachers often rely on peer support, continuous learning, reflective practice, and strong personal commitment to sustain their effectiveness despite systemic constraints. Collaborative relationships among teachers, school leaders, parents, and communities have been shown to improve problem-solving, reduce professional isolation, and support teacher well-being and instructional effectiveness. Furthermore, research suggests that inadequate institutional support may increase the risk of professional stress and burnout among special education teachers, highlighting the need for supportive organizational structures and policies.

Although existing literature extensively discusses inclusive education policies, teacher competencies, and implementation challenges, qualitative evidence remains limited on the lived experiences of public-school Special Needs Education (SNED) teachers across multiple Schools Division Offices in Pangasinan. Much of the current literature focuses on policy reforms, inclusive education frameworks, or localized school-based experiences, leaving a gap in understanding how SNED teachers across varying educational contexts navigate instructional adaptation, resource limitations, professional demands, and personal growth. Examining these experiences matters because teachers are on the frontline of inclusive education implementation and offer valuable insights into the realities of educational practice.

Therefore, this study explored the lived experiences of public-school Special Needs Education teachers across six Schools Division Offices in Pangasinan. Specifically, it sought to understand how teachers adapt instruction to accommodate diverse learner needs, the challenges they encounter in implementing inclusive educational practices, the coping mechanisms they employ to navigate professional demands, and the meanings and realizations they derive from their experiences. By documenting these lived experiences, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education in the Philippines. It provides evidence to inform policy improvements, professional development initiatives, and support systems for SNED teachers.

Research Questions

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Volume 2 | Issue 2 | November | 2026

This study addressed the contextual gap by documenting the experiences of Special Needs Education (SNED) teachers across six Schools Division Offices in Pangasinan. The findings are intended to inform school- and division-level support initiatives while remaining grounded in the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do SNED teachers describe their experiences in adapting instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners with disabilities?
2. What challenges do SNED teachers experience in the implementation of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment?
3. How do SNED teachers cope with and respond to the challenges they encounter in their professional practice?
4. What meanings, realizations, and reflections do SNED teachers derive from their experiences in special needs education?

Methodology

Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of Special Needs Education (SNED) teachers in public schools across selected Schools Division Offices in Pangasinan. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach that describes and interprets the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by individuals who have directly encountered it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this approach, the study aimed to capture SNED teachers' meanings, perceptions, challenges, coping strategies, and professional reflections as they navigated the complexities of delivering inclusive and specialized educational services.

Qualitative inquiry was appropriate because it allows researchers to examine participants' perspectives in their natural contexts and understand how individuals construct meaning from their experiences (Busetto et al., 2020). By focusing on teachers' narratives, the study generated rich descriptions of instructional adaptations, professional challenges, resilience-building practices, and insights gained throughout their careers in special needs education.

Locale

The study was conducted across six Schools Division Offices (SDOs) in the Province of Pangasinan, Philippines, namely: Alaminos City, San Carlos City, Dagupan City, Urdaneta City, Pangasinan I, and Pangasinan II. The researchers selected these divisions because they represent diverse educational contexts in which SNED programs are implemented.

The participating teachers worked in public schools in these divisions. To protect confidentiality and comply with ethical research standards, the study did not disclose specific schools or interview locations. This measure safeguarded participants' identities and encouraged candid sharing of experiences.

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Volume 2 | Issue 2 | November | 2026

Participants

The study participants were fifteen (15) Special Needs Education (SNED) teachers currently employed in public schools across the six Schools Division Offices in Pangasinan. The study used snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals with extensive knowledge and experience relevant to the phenomenon under study.

The researchers identified and invited initial participants who met the inclusion criteria. Subsequently, they referred other eligible SNED teachers within their professional networks. The recruitment process continued until the researchers obtained a sufficient number of information-rich participants and no substantially new insights emerged from additional interviews.

To qualify for participation, respondents were required to:

1. Be currently employed as a SNED teacher in a public school;
2. Have at least five years of teaching experience in special needs education; and
3. Express willingness to participate voluntarily in the study.

The sample size of fifteen participants was considered appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, as the primary objective was to obtain rich, detailed accounts of lived experiences rather than achieve statistical representation. Phenomenological studies typically utilize relatively small samples to facilitate depth of exploration and meaningful interpretation of participants' narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morse, 1994).

Data Collection Procedures

The researchers collected data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using a storytelling approach. This method allowed participants to recount their experiences in their own words while enabling the researchers to probe for clarification and elaboration as needed.

The researchers developed an interview guide based on the study's objectives and research questions. The guide included open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to discuss their instructional practices, professional challenges, coping mechanisms, and personal reflections on their work as SNED teachers.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted at mutually agreed schedules and venues conducive to confidentiality and participant comfort. With participants' informed consent, the team audio-recorded interviews to ensure accurate, complete data capture. The team also kept field notes to document contextual observations, emerging insights, and non-verbal cues during the interviews.

After data collection, the team transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim. Participants reviewed their transcripts and, through member checking, clarified, modified, or affirmed their responses. This process enhanced the accuracy and authenticity of the collected narratives.

Data Analysis

The study used Colaizzi's Seven-Step Method of Phenomenological Analysis to examine and interpret SNED teachers' lived experiences systematically. This method provided a rigorous,

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Volume 2 | Issue 2 | November | 2026

structured approach to uncovering the essence of participants' experiences and identifying the underlying meanings embedded in their narratives.

The analysis began with a thorough reading and rereading of all interview transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' accounts. Significant statements relevant to the phenomenon under investigation were then extracted and carefully examined. From these statements, the researchers formulated and interpreted meanings related to participants' experiences. The researchers then grouped these meanings into clusters and developed themes that reflected recurring patterns across the data. The researchers integrated these themes into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, capturing the complexity and depth of the participants' experiences.

From this comprehensive description, the study derived the phenomenon's fundamental structure, representing the essence of being a SNED teacher in the identified contexts. Finally, the study conducted member checking to verify the accuracy and credibility of the interpretations.

The analysis generated four overarching themes that collectively illuminated SNED teachers' instructional practices, challenges, coping strategies, and professional reflections across the six Schools Division Offices in Pangasinan.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to fundamental ethical principles governing human-participant research. Participation was voluntary, and researchers obtained informed consent before data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement, potential risks and benefits, and their right to refuse participation or withdraw at any stage without consequence.

The researchers maintained confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. Pseudonyms or participant codes were assigned during transcription and analysis to protect identities. The researchers securely stored and accessed audio recordings, transcripts, and research documents. All information was used exclusively for research purposes.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Tailoring Instruction to Individual Learner Profiles

The findings show that SNED teachers continually adapt their instruction to meet the diverse and complex learning needs of learners with disabilities. Participants emphasized individualized goal-setting, differentiated instruction, and flexible assessment strategies as essential to effective special needs education. Their experiences suggest that effective instruction requires teachers to move beyond standardized approaches and design learning experiences that respond to each learner's unique strengths, limitations, developmental level, and educational goals.

Teachers reported developing and implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), modifying lesson content and pacing, utilizing visual and multisensory materials, and providing accommodations that support meaningful participation and learning. Teachers also used alternative assessment methods to ensure learners could demonstrate knowledge and skills through approaches appropriate to their abilities. These practices illustrate the central role of instructional flexibility in promoting equitable access to education.

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Volume 2 | Issue 2 | November | 2026

The findings support the Department of Education's inclusive education framework, particularly DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021, which emphasizes individualized educational planning, differentiated instruction, and curriculum adaptation for learners with disabilities. The results further reinforce Agustina's (2026) and Devi's (2023) findings, which identified differentiated instruction as an effective approach to tailoring educational experiences to individual strengths, weaknesses, interests, and learning styles, fostering academic, social, and emotional development for all students.

More broadly, the findings show that inclusion is not simply about placing learners with disabilities in educational settings; it requires ongoing instructional decision-making by teachers. Participants' efforts show how responsive teaching practices bridge policy expectations and the practical realities of meeting diverse learner needs in the classroom.

Theme 2: Navigating Systemic and Environmental Obstacles

While participants demonstrated strong commitment to inclusive education, they simultaneously described numerous systemic and environmental barriers that hindered effective implementation. The findings indicate that instructional adaptation often occurs in contexts with limited resources, insufficient specialized materials, inadequate assistive technologies, and significant time constraints.

Participants reported that although existing curriculum frameworks provide general guidance, they frequently need substantial modification to accommodate learners' diverse abilities and learning profiles. Such adaptations require significant preparation, creativity, and professional judgment. However, these efforts are further challenged by the scarcity of specialized instructional materials and assistive devices needed to support individualized learning.

Assistive technology shortages emerged as a recurring concern among participants. Teachers described situations in which instructional effectiveness was constrained because appropriate technological resources were unavailable or inaccessible. Similarly, participants highlighted challenges in conducting comprehensive individualized assessments while managing numerous teaching and administrative responsibilities.

These findings align with studies by Allam and Martin (2021), Francisco et al. (2020), and Kassymova (2025), which found that administrative, instructional, and resource-related challenges often hinder the implementation of special needs education programs. Specifically, ineffective school leadership support, pedagogical difficulties, ambiguous program definitions, limited stakeholder knowledge, inadequate financial resources, and insufficient teacher preparation continue to undermine the delivery of quality inclusive education. Together, these findings suggest that implementation barriers are multifaceted and interconnected, requiring comprehensive interventions that improve policy clarity, stakeholder engagement, resource allocation, and teachers' ongoing professional development. Consequently, strengthening these areas is essential to improving the accessibility, effectiveness, and sustainability of special needs education programs.

The findings suggest that inclusive education depends on more than teacher competence and commitment. Instead, successful implementation depends on broader institutional conditions, including resource allocation, infrastructure, policy support, and organizational capacity. Without

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Volume 2 | Issue 2 | November | 2026

adequate systemic support, teachers often must compensate for institutional deficiencies through personal initiative and professional sacrifice.

Theme 3: Cultivating Resilience and Peer Collaboration

Despite encountering various professional challenges, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. The findings show that emotional regulation, collegial support, reflective practice, and a strong commitment to student success are essential coping mechanisms that help teachers sustain their effectiveness in demanding educational environments.

Participants frequently discussed the importance of patience, empathy, and emotional self-regulation when working with learners who require individualized attention and support. Many teachers described viewing challenges not as obstacles to instruction but as opportunities for creativity, growth, and professional development. Such perspectives appear to strengthen persistence and reduce the likelihood of professional burnout.

Collaboration also emerged as a critical source of support. Participants emphasized the value of sharing teaching strategies, discussing learner concerns, exchanging resources, and seeking advice from colleagues. These collaborative relationships provided both practical solutions and emotional encouragement, helping teachers navigate complex instructional situations more effectively.

Equally important was participants' unwavering belief that all learners can learn and succeed with appropriate support and opportunities. This conviction appeared to shape instructional practices, sustain motivation, and reinforce teachers' commitment to inclusive education.

The findings align with Billingsley and Bettini (2019), Nishat et al. (2026), and Zhang et al. (2023), who emphasized that personal resilience safeguards educator mental health against classroom barriers and highlighted the importance of emotional resilience and ongoing professional learning among special education teachers. Similarly, studies show that socio-emotional competence directly bolsters teacher resilience across institutional types (Usha & Thankam, 2019), enabling practitioners to transform systemic struggles into long-term professional persistence and dedication (Fitriyati et al., 2025).

Viewed through the lens of teacher resilience theory, the findings suggest that resilience is not merely an individual attribute but a dynamic process strengthened by supportive relationships, shared professional experiences, and meaningful educational outcomes. The participants' experiences show that personal and social resources both contribute significantly to sustained professional commitment.

Theme 4: Translating Field Experience into Educational Growth

Teachers described personal and professional growth resulting from their classroom experiences. They cited learner progress and developmental milestones as major motivators. The findings also show that participants viewed their special needs education experiences as opportunities for personal and professional transformation. Despite the challenges they faced, teachers consistently described growth from engaging with learners, families, and educational stakeholders.

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Volume 2 | Issue 2 | November | 2026

Participants reported developing greater patience, flexibility, empathy, adaptability, and commitment to lifelong learning throughout their professional journeys. Many described their experiences as catalysts for acquiring deeper pedagogical knowledge and a stronger understanding of diverse learner needs. These experiences appear to have contributed significantly to their professional identity and instructional competence.

Another prominent finding was the motivational influence of learner progress. Participants consistently identified student improvement, developmental milestones, and successful learning outcomes as their primary sources of encouragement and professional fulfillment. Witnessing learners overcome challenges and achieve meaningful progress reinforced their sense of purpose and commitment to the profession.

At the same time, participants expressed a strong desire for enhanced institutional support. They recognized that while personal dedication plays a vital role in promoting learner success, sustaining inclusive education requires adequate resources, specialized training, administrative support, and collaborative systems. Their reflections suggest that educational growth occurs most effectively when responsive institutions and enabling learning environments support teachers.

These findings align with Falcon et al. (2025), who reported similar results and noted that SNED teachers exhibit growth-driven mindsets and recognize that all students can improve with the right support and strategies for diverse learning needs. The results also support Huang et al. (2023), which emphasizes the role of teachers' personal growth in fostering engagement and instructional quality, and in shaping classroom management and student support.

Conclusion

This study revealed four overarching themes that characterized the lived experiences of Special Needs Education (SNED) teachers in Pangasinan. First, Tailoring Instruction to Individual Learner Profiles highlighted teachers' commitment to addressing diverse learner needs through individualized goal-setting, differentiated instruction, and flexible assessment practices. Second, Navigating Systemic and Environmental Obstacles demonstrated how teachers continuously confronted challenges related to curriculum adaptation, limited instructional resources, inadequate assistive technologies, and time constraints. Third, Cultivating Resilience and Peer Collaboration illustrated how emotional regulation, collegial support, and an enduring belief in learners' capacities sustained professional effectiveness. Finally, Translating Field Experience into Educational Growth showed how teachers turned classroom experiences into opportunities for personal development, professional growth, and renewed commitment to inclusive education, while recognizing the need for stronger institutional support.

Overall, the study concludes that SNED teachers play a pivotal role in translating inclusive education policies into meaningful educational experiences for learners with disabilities. Their ability to adapt instruction, persevere through challenges, and remain committed to learner success shows that inclusive education is sustained not only by policy mandates but also by teachers' dedication, competence, and resilience. However, the findings also indicate that teacher commitment alone is insufficient to ensure effective, sustainable implementation of inclusive education. Meaningful inclusion requires adequate resources, accessible assistive technologies, continuous professional development, collaborative support systems, and responsive school

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leadership. Thus, the success of special needs education depends on the combined efforts of teachers, schools, division offices, policymakers, families, and other educational stakeholders.

Interpret the findings within the context of the study's limitations. The study involved only fifteen SNED teachers from six Schools Division Offices in Pangasinan and utilized snowball sampling, which may have limited the diversity of experiences captured. As a phenomenological inquiry, the study sought depth of understanding rather than statistical representativeness; therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all SNED teachers. In addition, the study relied on participants' self-reported experiences, which reflect their individual perceptions and interpretations of their professional realities. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable contextual insights into SNED teachers' experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and professional reflections. It contributes to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education in the Philippine context.

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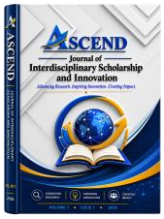
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