

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS FROM TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The general purpose of this study is to determine the issues and challenges of special education (SPED) teachers in teaching children with learning disabilities in the City Division of Ilagan Isabela, Philippines. The 15 SPED teachers were served as the respondents of this study using purposive sampling technique. Qualitative Research Method (QRM) was utilized to determine the issues and challenges of the teachers. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data. The analyses on the sharing of the key informants regarding their collective description of their challenges as SPED teacher led to the emergence of five distinct themes that include, choosing appropriate strategy and motivation; identifying individual needs; challenging but fulfilling; acceptance and patience; and respect one's right. Most teachers teaching children with learning disabilities did not receive any special needs education training from the school, they feel that they are not qualified to teach the children with learning disability. Moreover, teachers assigned in SPED classes lack of strategies in dealing with learners with disabilities. This study revealed that the classrooms for children with learning disabilities in Division of Ilagan at large have poor learning environment to support the SPED such as lack of budget, curriculum guide, Instructional Materials (IMs) and even school facilities. It could be concluded that placement of learners with special needs in an inclusive classroom with ordinary learners is not enough with no proper support. Learners with disability did not receive all the necessary support and services for accessing the curriculum facilities; and stakeholders' supports is very minimal to support the needs of the students enrolled in SPED classes. On the other hand, issues and problems were solved technically to sustain the positive working environment among school heads, teachers and stakeholders. The Department of Education Training and Development in collaboration with regional in service officers should organize continuous professional development opportunities on inclusion strategies of learners with SPED needs. The implementers of the SPED programs shall strictly adhere to the policies, and the strong support of the stakeholders shall be encouraged by formulating active organization spearheaded by the school head.

Keywords: special education, issues, challenges, learning disabilities, inclusive

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Education of learners with special needs has come an extensive and lengthy way; it can be in a method from special education (SPED) to integrated education and it as process from integrated education to inclusive education. Despite the prop-up by a number of guidelines, policies and programs from time to time to speed up the bound of all the efforts made in this direction the regular schools with inclusive orientation face many barriers, roadblocks, impediments and challenges.

However, SPED is currently a topical subject that is widely discussed and deliberated upon in the field of education, Philippines included. It has invariably been referred to as part of the global education for all agenda as a new education paradigm and as an educational reform goals to make our societies inclusive. The same is accepted in Philippines; however, the aspect of education for all is not effectively implemented despite of having policies and legal framework that advocate education for all specially in the implementation of SPED classes.

The Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1959, affirmed that mankind owes to the child the best it has to give. One of the principles concerned with the education of children with special needs runs:

“The child who is physically, mentally or visually handicapped shall be given the special treatment, education that are required of his particular condition.”

Moreover, Republic Act Nos. 3562 and 5250 were approved on June 13, 1968 respectively, these Acts provided that teachers, administrators, and supervisors of SPED should be trained by the Department of Education and impoverished.

Sarason (2015) indicated that one of the main purposes of the educational process is to “produce responsible, self-sufficient citizens who possess the self-esteem, initiative, skills and wisdom to continue individual growth and pursue knowledge.” Such an idea of education brings to light initiatives to promote the self-determination of students with disabilities.

Enhancing students with disabilities’ self-determined behavior characteristics has been a considerable element of policy, research, and curriculum standards and teaching practices to help students to have a smooth and successful transition to postsecondary settings (Cho et al., 2013).

The education should enhance teachers who teach children with learning disability and also create awareness in the society to accept children with special educational needs. Therefore, there is a need to introduce comprehensive special needs education in all teacher professional development-programs.

Teachers and administrators are perceived to be integral to the implementation of inclusive education. They played a vital role in the successful implementation of inclusive education as they are viewed as linchpins in the process of including students with disabilities

into regular classes. This cannot be achieved if awareness and attitudes towards inclusive education has not been practiced and developed (Dalonos, 2013).

Given the all citations, it is very important to know the different challenges faced by the teachers in handling classes in the SPED. Hence, this study addressed the issue of children with learning disabilities by exploring the challenges and challenges faced by SPED teachers who teach children with learning disability and how they try to overcome these challenges. There have been many problems in teaching children with learning disability in the City of Ilagan. Local teachers in most of the primary schools in the division of Ilagan lack training in special needs education for children with learning disability. Despite the “Primary Education Development Plan” (PEDP), that ensures education for all, the overall quality of primary education in Ilagan, City Philippines remains generally poor particularly in schools for children with learning disability.

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of this study is to determine the issues and challenges of SPED teachers in teaching children with learning disabilities in the City Division of Ilagan Isabela, Philippines. The empirical investigation is guided by the following objectives: (i) to see teachers’ challenges in teaching students with learning disabilities; (ii) to find out the approach and methods of teaching used by teachers when teaching children enrolled in SPED; and (iii) to find out to what extent the administrators and parents of children with learning disability collaborate with special needs education teachers.

Theoretical Framework

The scientific management theory and classical theory fitted in this study. In terms of the implementation of SPED, it focused on improving the efficiency of each individual in the organization. The major emphasis is on increasing the production through the use of intensive technology, and the human beings are just considered as adjuncts to machines in the performance of routine tasks. Besides, the scientific management theory basically encompasses the work performed on the production floor as these tasks are quite different from the other tasks performed within the organization. Such as, these are repetitive in nature, and the individual workers performing their daily activities are divided into a large number of cyclical repetition of same or closely related activities. Also, these activities do not require the individual worker to exercise complex-problem solving activity. Therefore, more attention is required to be imposed on the standardization of working methods and hence the scientific management theory laid emphasis on this aspect.

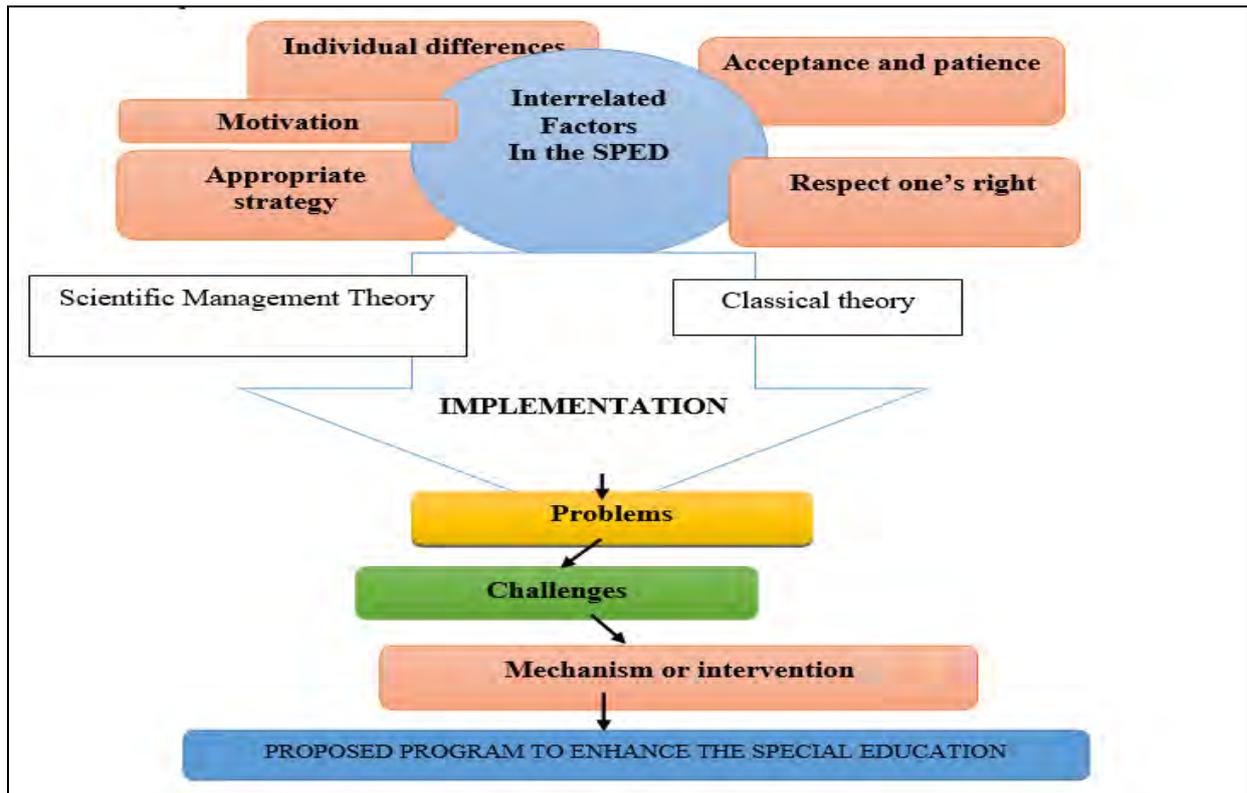


Figure 1. Paradigm showing the relationship between the variables considered in this study.

In terms of administration and supervision, teacher responsibilities regular classroom teachers view the learner as a total person, assess the behavioral signs of disorders/difficulties, provide varied activities for a wide range of individual differences, provide a setting for, and expect achievement of the learner, provide strategies that help the learner develop concepts meaningful to himself and provide first-hand challenges, obtain assistance in the form of constructive consultation and specialized materials and equipment, and confer regularly with the SPED teacher.

In order to establish good SPED classes, SPED coordinator plays a vital role. SPED coordinators shall maintain all school records for SPED learners, assist in the recruitment of prospective learners and SPED teachers, assist/initiate/organize training programs for SPED innovate programs and projects for both learners and teachers, monitor/evaluate classroom instruction and related activities in SPED, integrate and implement new and existing policies and guidelines of the SPED Program, demonstrate leadership in resourcing appropriate educational facilities/instructional aids.

The concepts and ideas served as the guiding wisdom in the development of this research study which is reflected in the paradigm of the study. The paradigm would serve as the backbone of this present investigation.

The researchers conducted a research to know prevailing issues of the SPED and to what extent are these experienced by teachers in terms of teachers; instruction support; and curriculum. As seen in figure 1 after identifying the issues, problems and challenges in the SPED classes encountered by the teachers, the proposed action plan in order to enhance the SPED would be provided.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design. The main objective was to find the challenges faced by teachers when teaching in SPED classes and how they try to overcome them. In order to get information from the special needs education teachers, a descriptive research design was used to provide answers to the questions associated with a particular research problem. Since descriptive research is primarily concerned with finding out what is in the field, it used this study as a suitable way to gather vital information regarding the current status of the problem which was the challenges faced by teachers when teaching learners with developmental disability and how they try to overcome these challenges. This design greatly helped me to increase the knowledge about the challenges faced by teachers.

The study was conducted to the public elementary schools with SPED learning center of Schools Division of City of Ilagan. Selected SPED teachers of City Division of Ilagan were served as the sample of this study. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling technique.

The main target was SPED teachers, and not regular teachers. Therefore, the one criterion of choosing informants was based on the fact that only special needs education teachers were wanted for the interview. Another criterion for choosing the informants was the number of years a special needs education teacher had been teaching children with learners with disability. For this study it was decided that the special needs teachers, who had been working with children with learners for many years, were a good choice to answer the research questions.

A total of 15 teachers from five different elementary schools were interviewed. The study was conducted during the School Year 2019-2020. Permission to conduct the survey with the SPED teachers of City Division of Ilagan was sought by the researchers from the Schools Division Superintendent. Upon the approval of the request by Schools Division Superintendent, the researchers personally administered the interview among the target respondents. To allow collection of detailed information from the teachers about how they teach students with learning disabilities and the challenges faced by teachers in the different schools of City Division of Ilagan, interview method was seen suitable.

An interview guide questionnaire was utilized as the primary data gathering instrument for the study. The interview guide was designed by the researcher based on readings of related literature and studies on concepts of challenges and issues in SPED in the country. An interview was carried out with every teacher selected to participate in the study. The time arranged for an interview was approximately 25-30 minutes for every teacher. The interview questions were formulated on the basis of the main research questions and sub-questions. The research questions were translated from English to Filipino if necessary, and the medium of instruction in all SPED classes. For this reason, all respondents were interviewed in Filipino for better communication between the interviewer and the interviewee.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analyses of the empirical data yielded five themes on the notable challenges faced in SPED. The analyses on the sharing of the key informants regarding their collective description of their challenges as SPED teacher led to the emergence of five distinct themes that include; (i) choosing appropriate strategy and motivation; (ii) identifying individual needs; (iii) challenging but fulfilling; (iv) acceptance and patience; and (v) respect one's right as shown in Figure 2.

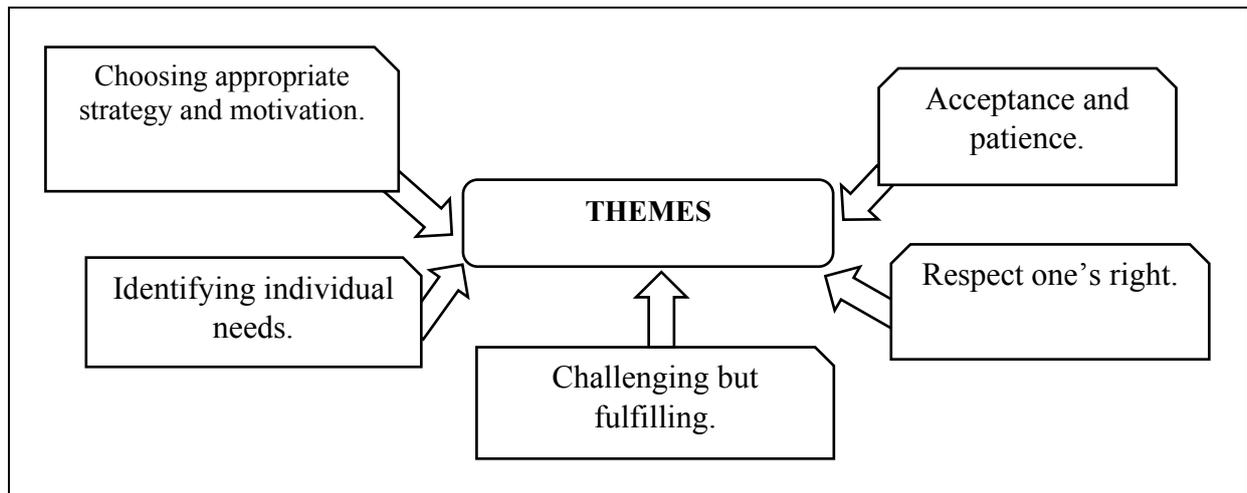


Figure 2. Themes to challenges of teachers in the implementation of SPED

Choosing Appropriate Strategy and Motivation

The learner's motivation is mostly regarded as a central condition for successful learning. However, other factors like intelligence, previous knowledge and interest play an important role as well. In the context of teaching SPED classes, strategies should be considered. Motivation and applicable strategies in teaching as an activating orientation to a target status which is regarded as positive in teaching-learning situation (Rheinberg, 2010).

Based from the interview, motivation is a driving force to act in order to achieve something as articulated by the respondents during the interview:

Teacher Cactus: "In handling regular classes, it is very easy to initiate teaching strategies, but if you are teaching learners with disabilities, you have a limited teaching approach. Besides, it is very hard to motivate the learners with disabilities."

Based on the statement of Teacher Cactus, the learner's motivation is mostly regarded as central condition for successful learning. However, other factors like the status and learning difficulties may affect the learners' learning. Hence, the interest among the learners with special needs play an important role as well.

Basically, what is problematic about learning and knowledge-gaining processes is integrating strategies in teaching learners with disabilities. It also hard to introduce new knowledge to them since they have their own field of interest (Friedrich & Mandl, 2012).

It clearly depicted in the statement of Teacher Cactus that, “...but if you are teaching learners with disabilities, you have a limited teaching approach.” This statement was supported by one of the key informants that:

Teacher Champaca: “I had a positive experienced in teaching special education. Being a special education teacher, in terms of teaching strategies, you should not think of it but, you should apply the applicable techniques if you are in the actual teaching situation. I have encountered problem about it and I have very limited teaching approaches in handling special education classes.

Necessarily, school for learners with special needs has to be the place where students learn how to learn and thus successfully acquire learning strategy. It means that the statements of Teacher Champaca and Teacher Camia contribute a development of the learners in spite of their learning disabilities. This corroborates with the study of Aquino et al. (2019) that balance and holistic development of the children should be ensured.

According to Nachiappan et al. (2018), as a way to overcome the problem of teachers in teaching and learning, practical teacher must have wide knowledge through extensive reading in order to implement the various activities and more interesting. This was testified by one of the teachers that,

Teacher Camia: “Be positive and try your best to initiate best strategy to be employed in teaching learners with special needs.

Moreover, the responses of the key informants supported the study of Tough (2015) that current pedagogical research focuses on student’s learning processes in general and also on which learning strategies students should be introduced to enable effective learning.

Also, Teacher Champaca, one of the key informants mentioned that “Lack of available and updated Teachers guide and curriculum guide and seminars among teachers” is one of the problems she encountered. This means that in the conflict between imparting knowledge and developing the students’ learning competence school education puts the focus on the materials needed in teaching.

The study revealed that limited special needs education teachers in Division of Ilagan was a problem. It was found that the special needs education teachers in some schools were not professionally educated. They have limited strategies in dealing with the learners with special needs. It was also revealed that the colleges that provide special needs educations for teachers were few compared to ordinary education colleges. However, these cannot produce enough teachers to teach special needs education schools in the entire division.

Given all the citation and testimonies of the respondent, teaching strategies and motivation are important elements in teaching learners with special needs. Thus, it is important for teachers to examine the learning disabilities among students as early as possible to know what are the appropriate strategy and motivation to be used in teaching.

Identifying Individual Needs

Recognizing individual differences of the learners is a basic concept when teachers prepare to teach. It is a fundamental assumption of strategic teaching and learning that what we choose to teach in the classroom should be an interaction of what we know about the variables of instruction, learning, achievement, and contextual factors. This assumption has driven our quest as individuals and groups to develop an instructional framework (Jones et al., 2017).

In an interview, Teacher Carnation mentioned: *“I teach learners with different disabilities in a day. It is very hard to identify their needs.”* It is clearly reflected in the statement of Teacher Carnation that *“...teaching learners with special needs is very hard because they have their individual needs.”* This means that in handling Learners with Special Needs (LSNs), individual needs must be considered. Fairness treatment should also be given to all the students. This statement supported to the result of the study of Evans (2015) that paying attention to the needs of students from diverse groups within your course design including an equality analysis/impact assessment processes in your course development is a useful way of ensuring that you give due consideration to inclusivity and accessibility. This is also in line with the response of Teacher Pearl during the interview that:

“In instruction for me, it is very difficult to prepare because of the lack of budget and sometimes because of over workload given to us needed to teach our learners, we need to prepare different activities depending on the nature of needs of our students. Truly, it is hard to teach students with varied learning needs.”

The statement of Teacher Pearl implicates that all teachers need to have knowledge and wider understanding of the minimum core elements in order to apply them in planning, delivering and assessing inclusive teaching and learning and to support learners adequately with their skills in these areas with different learning needs. Developing and improving minimum core skills enables the SPED teacher to consider the best way to teach and support the development of the skills of the learners with special needs.

Moreover, individual needs among the learners with special needs shall be considered. This condition supported by some of the key informants that:

Teacher Sampaguita: “... in almost 23 years now, I can say that I can make impossible things to become possible like letting join them activities with regular students even they have their learning disabilities. Besides, you need to consider their individual needs example by joining them to participate in drum and lyre and try to compete with the regular students.”

Based from the statements of Teacher Sampaguita, she encountered the same challenges in handling students with disabilities. This means that teachers in SPED encountered difficulties if they have limited skills in handling the students with special needs.

Moreover, it is important that teachers especially early childhood educators should understand parental involvement and recognize its positive effects to the teaching and learning process (Bartolome et al., 2020). This was testified by one of the teachers that,

Teacher Daisy: "I handle them very difficult because of their individual needs. You need to exert more effort to cater the needs of the students with special needs. Likewise, the special education teachers must recognize the parental involvement in order to help their children develop their potential."

Challenging but Fulfilling

Douglas and Travers (2012) recognized that IEPs can assist students with special educational needs to gain access to an appropriate education in spite of their learning disabilities. This was supported by Teacher Gold that: *"It is very challenging to teach learners with special needs. Their performance would be the reflection of your achievement."* This means that as SPED teacher, it is very important to help the students develop their potential in spite of their learning difficulties. Teacher considers different factors that may help the students grow and enhance their skills if they have. These statements were also supported by some of the key informants that:

Teacher Santan: "...And as a teacher we should not stop aiming for the development of the students, we need to help them grow and enhance their skills, not only for our daily undertaking in the school, promotion but for our contribution to the students on how they cope with their learning disabilities."

Teacher Santan emphasized that as SPED teacher we need to extend help to the learners with special needs not for the promotion. It also stressed out that the teacher's contribution to the students on how they cope with their learning disabilities is very important. This implies that teachers' effort and skills play a very important role in molding and shaping the learners' abilities and potential in school despite their difficulties.

The result of the study implies that there are some SPED teachers who are satisfied in teaching students with learning disabilities. In this belief, understanding learning disabilities or challenges that may impede a student's ability to learn is vital to providing the best possible classroom environment. Students with learning disabilities are no less intelligent than the average student and often require very simple accommodations to maximize their learning experience.

Acceptance and Patience

In an interview, Teacher Camia mentioned:

"My experience especially deaf, they had no medical certificate, I could even have observed other kinds of disability but I didn't have the right to tell their parents because they might be embarrassed if I will advise their children to undergo check-up. It was very difficult because if I will give feedbacks and comments on them, their parents would not let their children to attend studies anymore. So, acceptance of the parents must be considered. In that situation, as a teacher, I need to be more patience in handling this kind of situation."

It is clearly stated based on the statement of Teacher Camia that “...*It was very difficult because if I will give feedbacks and comments on them, their parents would not let their children to attend studies anymore. So, acceptance of the parents must be considered*” that in her line, through the feedbacks and comments of the SPED teachers, parents will be immediately embarrassed. This implies that the value of acceptance must be intensified and the essence of working as a team or partner in helping the students to be fully developed shall be considered.

Additionally, acceptance must be given value in handling SPED classes. Teachers and parents discussed the consequences and other significances if the parents refused to accept the learning disabilities of their children. As one of the SPED teacher Carnation confirmed that: “*Our school head, some of my co-teachers and parents are very supportive to the special education program. But, based on my challenges, some of the parents are deniable; they refused to accept the reality that their children have learning difficulties. In this case, as special education teacher, you need to be patience and considerate.*” It is clearly reflected on the statement of Teacher Carnation that “... *some of the parents are deniable, they refused to accept the reality that their children have learning difficulties*” that in her line, there are still parents who never accept the situation of their children with learning disabilities. This implies that even the school head and other teacher extend support to the SPED program if parents refuse to accept the reality, the ultimate goal of the SPED program would not probably realize.

Respect Student’s Right

Since then, the right to education has been widely recognized and developed by a number of international normative instruments elaborated by the United Nations, thus education is not a privilege. It is a human right (Matkoba, 2018). Based on this, Teacher Gold mentioned that, “*No curriculum given for ID, AU and other learners with disabilities. Our curriculum is based on K-12 but we often modify it base in our learning needs because it is the right of the students to learn and study.*” The statement of Teacher Gold implies that in the country the right of the students to access quality education shall be given to them regardless of their status. It is very essential to help the students with disabilities to access education with the help of the teachers. This is being supported that, the state shall protect and promote the right of all the citizens to quality education at all levels and shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all (Article XIV, Section 1).

Moreover, it is very important to consider the rights of the learners. This was stressed out by Yusof and Ismail (2020) that the acceptance of special needs children in private and public kindergartens is under consideration and following the rules and regulations.

Also, despite the insufficient resources and other materials in teaching students with disabilities, the teacher finds possible ways to teach them. The teacher has the ability to modify some parts of the curriculum in the regular classes to fit the curriculum of the SPED classes. Teacher Tulips stressed out that, “*We encountered lack of instructional materials; the sample IMs were not provided that will be served as our basis to determine what appropriate skills and competencies to be taught to our students. So, as a teacher, I need to download IMs and activity sheets in the Learning Management Resource System since the children have right for education.*”

Further, the respondents mentioned other several challenges and related problems to the SPED. The summary of their challenges is presented in Table 1;

Table 1
Related Challenges of the Special Education Teachers

Challenges	Frequency
1. Special Education teachers experienced financial constraints in teaching special education.	2
2. Insufficient materials needed in teaching special education classes.	2
3. Instructions are affected due to other task given like coaching in special events.	2
4. special education teachers have experienced difficulties in preparing lesson plans.	2
5. Limited support from the stakeholders.	2
6. Delegate assignments and chairmanship to the special education teachers.	1
7. Disseminating information is not on time.	1
8. Limited knowledge on the special education Curriculum.	2
9. Infrastructure not catering for the disabled.	1
10. Lack of resources and non-inclusive curriculum.	1
11. Teachers lack competence to deal with learners experiencing challenges.	1
12. Teachers have negative attitude towards teaching learners with disabilities and learning challenges.	1
13. Teachers assigned in special education is not their specialization.	1

Given all the related challenges of the SPED teachers, it underscores in curriculum, financial aspects, teachers’ competence, stakeholders’ participation and school heads’ management and supervision. This only proves that full participation among the members of the school contributes to the attainment of the objectives of the SPED classes.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the research study, several conclusions were drawn. First, most teachers teaching children with learning disabilities did not receive any special needs education training from the school, they feel that they are not qualified to teach the children with learning disability. Moreover, teachers assigned in SPED classes lack of strategies in dealing with learners with disabilities. Second, this study revealed that the classrooms for children with learning disabilities in Division of Ilagan at large have poor learning environment to support the SPED such as lack of budget, curriculum guide, Instructional Materials (IMs) and even school facilities. Third, it could be concluded that placement of learners with special needs in an inclusive classroom with ordinary learners is not enough with no proper support. Fourth, learners with disability did not receive all the necessary support and services for accessing the curriculum facilities. Fifth, stakeholders supports is very minimal to support the needs of the students enrolled in SPED classes. On the other hand, issues and problems were solved technically to sustain the positive working environment among school heads, teachers and stakeholders.

In the light of the findings and conclusions drawn from the results of the study, the Department of Education should continue strengthening the implementation of SPED in different schools through the following recommendations. First, the Department of Education Training and Development in collaboration with regional in service officers should organize continuous professional development opportunities on inclusion strategies of learners with SPED needs. In addition, workshops should equip teachers with practical skills on instruction, collaboration, alternative forms of evaluation, classroom management, and conflict resolution, and on how to adapt the curriculum. At the same time, the teachers' initial training programs should incorporate inclusive education components. Second, provisions of human and material resources are also important for implementation of SPED needs. The Department of Education should provide more adequate resources, equipment, and teaching material for learners with diverse learning needs. Third, teachers handling SPED classes are not trained in the area of Special Needs Education. Therefore, these teachers are failing to support learners with learning disabilities adequately. The Department of Education should recruit trained teachers, and those who are not trained should be trained through in-service training. Fourth, proper placement of the students with learning disabilities shall be done. The implementers of the SPED programs shall strictly adhere to the policies. Fifth, the strong support of the stakeholders shall be encouraged by formulating active organization spearheaded by the school head. Sixth, future research in this area should involve systematic development work across a range of sites and settings, which also allows for the examination of the impact of the innovations upon achievement.

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