

Public Special Education Teachers' Challenges, Social Support, and Meaning in Teaching Children on the Autism Spectrum

Kristel Anne T. Diaz¹ and Dennis V. Madrigal²

^{1,2}*University of Negros Occidental-Recoletos, Bacolod City, Philippines*

Introduction: Special Education Teachers are the primary providers of knowledge for children on the autism spectrum. With the increasing number of autism-diagnosed children, all special education teachers are probably going to need to teach a child with autism. This study explored the public special education teachers' experiences in teaching children on the autism spectrum in Northern Negros Occidental. The research aimed to raise awareness on teaching children on the autism spectrum and to foster greater support for teachers handling them.

Methodology: This research utilized a descriptive phenomenological approach. Ten participants were selected through purposive sampling and participated in unstructured in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis of the transcripts was conducted using the modified van Kaam approach, as advocated by Moustakas (1994). Additionally, to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the framework introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985) was employed.

Results: Results indicated that teachers have grappled with numerous challenges in handling children with ASD, specifically behavioral and instructional difficulties, personal obstacles, and institutional barriers. Notwithstanding, a stream of reinforcement arose from social support that helped them survive these difficulties by means of collaboration with parents and co-teachers, and diagnoses from health professionals. The interplay of struggle and support yielded a deep sense of meaning derived from observing children's progress.

Conclusion: This study revealed that teaching children on the autism spectrum means entering each day ready to patiently and gently meet complexity and unpredictability. Teachers' persistence is a deliberate and conscious decision—to show up, to care, and to try again. The work of these special education teachers is an act of loving amidst challenges, of believing in development where progress is slow, and of sustaining compassion in the face of relentless demands. Theirs is a practice of patience and survival for themselves and for their students.

Practical Value: The practical value of this study provides useful teacher-reported, classroom-based data that can be a basis in the provision of better institutional support that teachers need to survive and carry out their role, and to reinforce social support especially between home and school. With the attrition problem for special education teachers nationwide, it is best to address what teachers thought as areas for improvement to help suppress this issue and to ensure they feel valued. Lastly, this may pave the way to identify the factors that contribute to their successful teaching experiences and retention.

Direction for Future Research: Future researchers may come up with conducting the same study utilizing special education teacher participants in private institutions or in different geographical areas. They may also explore the experiences of Special Education teachers of other educational backgrounds and tenure of service. Lastly, a quantitative or mixed method can also be explored or incorporated on the same topic to elaborate and numerically validate these findings.

Keywords: special education, autism spectrum, challenges, social support, meaning, descriptive phenomenological, Philippines

CORRESPONDENCE: kristelannediaz327@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7077-0462>¹