



Practices and Challenges of Parents in Handling Learners with Special Educational Needs in Inclusive Education

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences, parenting practices, and challenges faced by parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) at San Isidro Elementary School in Tagbilaran City, Bohol. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological design, the research aimed to understand parents' emotional responses, coping mechanisms, and involvement in their children's educational development. Ten parents participated through purposive sampling, and data were collected using a validated five-part interview guide. Interviews were conducted in Cebuano and translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: guided support and collaboration, emotional stress, communication difficulties, learning support needs, and parental aspirations. Findings highlighted the importance of consistent parental involvement, emotional encouragement, and partnership with educators in fostering academic and personal growth in children with SEN. Despite systemic and emotional challenges, parents demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness in advocating for their children. The study emphasizes the need for inclusive policies, strengthened school-family collaboration, and context-specific support systems to empower families and enhance educational outcomes for children with SEN.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Learners with special educational needs (LSEs), Parental involvement, Inclusive education, Special educational needs (SEN).

1. Introduction

Parents play an indispensable role in the educational journey of Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEs). Their involvement often begins with advocacy ensuring that their children have access to suitable educational resources and support systems tailored to their developmental needs (Ameis et al., 2020; Sultana & Purdy, 2024). Within the home, parents nurture cognitive and emotional development through structured routines, personalized activities, and emotionally supportive environments (Padillo et al., 2021; Valencia & Sagnep, 2022). Their collaboration with educators and therapists ensures consistency across settings, enhancing both academic and behavioral outcomes (Jansen van Rensburg et al., 2024; Rosales et al., 2022). For LSEs, individualized educational plans, evidence-based instructional strategies, and psychosocial support are often critical to success (Ke et al., 2018; Mohamed & Almaz, 2024). Parents, through active participation, help facilitate inclusive learning environments that reinforce resilience, self-confidence, and a strong sense of belonging (Mokoena & Kern, 2022; Warren et al., 2021). Such involvement not only supports academic achievement but also contributes to holistic well-being and long-term life satisfaction (Chan et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2024).

In the Philippine context, the implementation of inclusive education policies by the Department of Education (DepEd) has yielded mixed outcomes. While these policies aim to support LSEs, schools particularly in rural areas often lack adequately trained personnel, specialized teaching materials, and infrastructure (Padillo et al., 2024; Vistar et al., 2024). Despite these systemic barriers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a crucial role in promoting awareness, filling service gaps, and advocating for more inclusive practices (Campado et al., 2023; Valencia & Sagnep, 2022).

Parents of LSEs face multifaceted challenges. Navigating the complexities of special education systems, understanding legal frameworks, and obtaining appropriate services can be time-consuming and emotionally taxing (White & Talpade, 2024; Chebil & Radjel, 2024). Financial strain is another pressing issue, given the high cost of specialized therapies, interventions, and assistive technologies (Vistar et al., 2024; Efstratopoulou et al., 2022). Balancing these demands with other familial responsibilities often leads to caregiver stress, emotional burnout, and social isolation (Plavčak, 2024; Di Renzo et al., 2021). In Bohol, however, many parents have adopted resourceful strategies to support their children's development. Active parental participation in educational

planning, collaboration with SpEd teachers, and involvement in community support groups are common practices (Valencia & Sagnep, 2022). Families often use structured routines, positive reinforcement, and locally available therapies to improve outcomes despite limited resources (Padillo et al., 2024; Rens & Louw, 2021).

Parental engagement also includes emotional caregiving helping LSEs cope with frustration, anxiety, and self-doubt. By nurturing their child's strengths and recognizing progress, parents help foster resilience, autonomy, and self-efficacy (Warren et al., 2021; Klefbeck, 2023). Advocacy is another constant demand, with parents pushing for accommodations, specialized instruction, and greater inclusion in mainstream settings (Yang et al., 2024; Coder, 2024).

Moreover, coordination with healthcare providers, therapists, and educators requires significant time and emotional investment. Long-term planning particularly regarding independence, employment, and social inclusion adds to the complexity of raising a child with SEN (Kuenzel & Duerden, 2024; Badger et al., 2024). Parents must also maintain equilibrium within the family unit, fostering positive sibling relationships and ensuring the well-being of all family members (Mokoena & Kern, 2022).

Despite these hurdles, many parents exhibit extraordinary resilience and adaptability. Studies suggest that emotional regulation, spirituality, and access to support networks are protective factors that promote caregiver well-being (Hsiao, 2023; Humphries, 2024). Peer support groups, community-based programs, and capacity-building interventions have also shown positive effects in reducing caregiver burden (Nugaeva et al., 2022; Qorib et al., 2024). Conducting localized research, such as studying the experiences of parents in the four primary schools in Tagbilaran City, Bohol, is vital. Such inquiry can reveal effective parenting practices, gaps in support systems, and the overall impact of parental involvement on the educational outcomes, emotional well-being, and social development of LSEs (Magree, 2024; Soo, 2024).

2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences, parenting practices, and challenges encountered by parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SENs). The phenomenological method was selected for its capacity to provide rich, in-depth insights into the everyday realities of caregiving, allowing for the exploration of participants' emotional responses, coping mechanisms, and engagement in their children's educational development. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the essence of their lived experiences. The study involved ten parent participants from San Isidro Elementary School, each of whom had a child with SEN enrolled in the 2024–2025 academic year. Participants were chosen through non-probability purposive sampling, which is appropriate for qualitative research as it ensures the inclusion of individuals with direct, relevant caregiving experience and contextual insight (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Data were gathered using a validated five-part interview guide, developed collaboratively with experts in qualitative research and special education. The guide explored key domains such as parenting strategies, encountered challenges, emotional reactions to the child's condition, coping techniques, and perceived support needs. To foster natural expression, interviews were conducted in Cebuano and later translated into English for comprehensive analysis. Thematic analysis followed the framework outlined by Wolgemuth et al. (2024), involving systematic coding and the identification of significant, recurring themes. From the data, five major themes emerged: routine management, emotional stress, communication difficulties, learning support needs, and parental aspirations for their child's future. These insights offer valuable implications for the development of tailored support interventions aimed at empowering families of children with SENs.

3. Results

3.1. Parental Practices in Managing the Educational and Developmental Needs of Children with SENs

Guided Support and Collaboration. This theme highlights the importance of teamwork and expert guidance in fostering student success. SpEd teachers bring specialized skills and strategies to meet the special requirements of kids with ASD. Collaboration between general teachers, SpEd teachers, therapists, and parents ensures tailored approaches, providing the right academic, social, and emotional support. Guided by professionals, teams can implement IEPs, share insights, and create consistent routines that promote learning and development. This unified approach enables children with ASD to thrive in inclusive, supportive environments.

Participant 1 disclosed that:

Among follow up pon ug iyang mga assignments, mangutana mi ug unsay need niya. (We also follow up on his assignments and ask him what he needs.)

Also, Participant 4 narrated she made follow-up on her child's education. She said:

Nagfollow up ko kanunay sa iyang leksyon, ako na siya tudloan sa iyang mga leksyon labi na sa Math, gipalitan na nako ug sticks para magamit niya pagcount. (I always follow up on his lessons; I teach him his lessons, especially in Math. I even bought him some sticks to use for counting.)

Futhermore, Participant 8 added:

Kada adlaw akong gi follow up ilang leksyon o assignment ug ako siyang tabangan unsaon kini pagtubag. (Every day, I follow up on their lessons or assignments and help him with how to answer them.)

The data imply that students' progress, behavior, and learning needs enable SpEd teachers to tailor interventions and track their effectiveness. Collaboration among teachers requires shared access to this data, ensuring consistency in instructional approaches and adjustments. Analyzing trends over time helps teams identify patterns and refine IEPs.

Furthermore, data-driven insights inform evidence-based practices, fostering continuous improvement. Efficient data management and collaboration streamline communication, helping all stakeholders provide well-rounded, informed support for students with ASD.

In order to support children diagnosed with ASD in inclusive classrooms, Al Jaffal (2022) investigated the use of joint interventions between general education and special education instructors. The research demonstrated that when general teachers and SpEd teachers collaborate, students with ASD have better academic and social outcomes. The study also emphasizes the importance of guiding general teachers without specialized ASD training.

The study of Stahmer et al. (2024) reviewed the *execution of evidence-based procedures for kids with ASD*, highlighting the critical role of SpEd teachers. The study found that collaborative, team-based approaches involving teachers, therapists, and families are essential to successfully applying these practices in classroom settings. Regular collaboration ensures that interventions are consistent and customized for each learner needs.

In their 2024 study, Reichow and Song examined how well peer-mediated therapies worked for kids with ASD. It was discovered that peer, special education, and general education teacher collaboration enhances social interaction and inclusion in educational settings. Better implementation of social skills programs for kids with ASD is another benefit of guided collaboration.

The duty of care principle states that it is the accountability of adults to cultivate the development of children with impairments. The findings of Opoku et al. (2024) suggested that the development of special children may be impacted by parents' inadequate knowledge of unhealthy food. Additionally, the results underscore the deficiency of cooperation and correspondence among educators concerning the dietary habits and well-being of special education students.

In order to promote healthy infant development, Subramanyam et al. (2024) assert that effective communication must also be established. Schooling, curriculum design, inclusivity, teacher training and understanding of current advances, and parent-teacher contact all bear a significant impact on children's holistic health. Key elements in children's development include a healthy environment, physical activity, a balanced diet, the effects of microplastics on kids and teenagers, and global warming. A scientific approach to well-being and a thorough comprehension of the rules and regulations pertaining to child welfare and protection are essential.

The second question asked about parents' feelings when they first learned pertaining to their kids' special educational needs.

Unequal Progress and Concern of Falling Behind. This is a critical issue in educating children with ASD. Despite advancements in research and specialized interventions, not all children with ASD benefit equally. Some students' progress quickly with the proper support, while others struggle due to the lack of individualized care or resources. This disparity can lead to concerns about confident children falling behind, especially in inclusive settings where the pace may not match their unique needs. To address unequal progress, it's vital to ensure equitable access to trained teachers, adaptive strategies, and ongoing assessments to foster consistent growth for every student.

Most participants mentioned that they were worried and felt anxious.

Nagool ug nabalaka. (Worried and anxious.) P1. *Nagool kaayu ug nasakitan.* (Very worried and hurt.) P2. *Nagool gyud ko.* (I am really worried.) P3. *Nagool ug naproblema kay iyang mga classmates kamao na, siya dili pa.* (I am worried and troubled because his classmates already know, but he doesn't.) P4. *Nakurat ug nagool.* (Surprised and worried.) P7. *Nabalaka.* (Worried.) P8. *I feel sad and worried.* P9.

Participant 5 added:

Abi gyud nako nga di siya mka grade 1, nabalaka gyud ko. (I really thought he wouldn't be able to pass Grade 1; I was really worried.)

The theme "Unequal Progress and Concern of Falling Behind" in educating children with ASD highlights the importance of data in addressing disparities. Data collection allows teachers to track student progress and identify gaps early on. By analyzing IEPs and behavioral data, schools can adjust strategies to support children lagging behind. This data-driven approach ensures that interventions are personalized and effective. Furthermore, aggregating data on a broader scale can reveal systemic issues, such as resource allocation disparities, enabling schools to address inequities and provide targeted support to ensure all kids with ASD thrive.

The study by Chen et al. (2024) discusses heterogeneity in the *developmental trajectories* of children with ASD. It found that despite receiving similar interventions, children with ASD display varying rates of progress in language, social skills, and behavior. This variability underscores the need for individualized instruction and the risk of students falling behind if interventions are not adequately tailored to their needs.

Willis et al. (2019) focused on the effectiveness of *IEPs* and found that their success highly depends on the quality of data collected on student progress. Without proper monitoring, some students experience significant delays. The study highlights that unequal progress often results from inconsistencies in implementing evidence-based practices and measuring their effectiveness.

Kushwaha et al.'s (2024) study on *inclusive education practices for students with ASD* found that while inclusion can benefit some students, others may struggle to keep up with their typically developing peers. The study suggests that without sufficient support and tailored strategies, students with ASD in inclusive settings may fall behind academically and socially, exacerbating unequal progress.

Anyone can become vulnerable when faced with challenging situations. Families with kids who have special needs are at danger, as are families dealing with other stressful situations like parental mental illness or poverty. According to Plavčák's (2024) research, families of children with special needs should get treatments that are balanced, sensitive, and adaptable. Understanding families in the context of their life is crucial, especially the emotional phases involved in raising a kid with special needs and other challenging situations they could

encounter. Families ought to participate in the creation of interventions should be customized to meet their unique requirements.

Today, education has become a crucial indicator of development and the success of society, focusing on the knowledge and skills that children need to meet. In practice, however, children's experiences may not be in line with the goals set by adults, and instead of enjoying school, they can experience reluctance and stress. By examining children's experiences, Soo (2024) investigates the causes of vulnerability in the educational setting.

The third question was the description of a child's educational journey.

Achievement Through Progress and Encouragement. This theme emphasizes the vital role of consistent support in personal growth. Progress is not always linear, but individuals can overcome setbacks and stay motivated with encouragement. Celebrating small wins fosters a sense of accomplishment, reinforcing confidence and resilience.

This theme is compelling in education, as students thrive when their efforts are recognized, driving them toward more significant achievements. Teachers and mentors are crucial in providing positive reinforcement and guiding students through challenges. Also, a supportive and encouraging environment helps individuals believe in their potential, enabling them to reach their goals through steady progress.

Participant 1 disclosed:

Dako na gyud pud siya ug kalamboan ug icompare sauna, maayo pud ug feedback iyang maestra sa iyang performance sa klasi. (He has really improved a lot compared to before, and his teacher also gives good feedback on his performance in class.)

Participant 2 added:

So far, ni improve naman pud siya, worth it rapud among mga paningkamot ug pagpatherapy ug pagpaskwela. (So far, he has improved, and our efforts in therapy and education are worth it.)

According to Participant 3 her child has improved:

Sauna ug karon, arang arang na gyud kaayo kay sauna diman siya mkaapas ug kopya sa homework pero karon moingon naman siya nga naa siyay homework ug magpatabang unta siya. (Before and now, he has really improved because before he couldn't keep up with copying homework, but now he says he has homework and wants to ask for help.)

Also, Participant 5 added:

Na improve na pud siya, sauna dina makahibaw ug suwat bisan naay gisubay, pero karon makahibaw na bisan walay gisubayan.nakhibaw npud siya sa ubang colors karon. (He has also improved; before, he couldn't write even with guidance, but now he can write even without support. He also knows some other colors now.)

Furthermore, Participant 8 said:

Okey lang, ni improve iyang performance. (That's okay; his performance has improved.)

For children with ASD, the theme "Achievement Through Progress and Encouragement" holds critical data implications. Regular data collection on academic, social, and behavioral progress enables teachers to provide targeted encouragement and reinforcement strategies tailored to each child's needs. By tracking milestones in IEPs, teachers can identify when positive reinforcement is most effective, motivating further progress. Data-driven insights also allow for adjustments in teaching methods and interventions, ensuring that achievements no matter how small are recognized and celebrated. This approach promotes skill development and boosts self-esteem, helping children with ASD reach their full potential.

Fernández Cerero et al. (2024) investigated the impacts of *positive reinforcement* on the academic achievement of kids diagnosed with ASD. The findings significantly improved their learning outcomes when they received consistent encouragement and reinforcement for their efforts.

Sonnenschein et al. (2021) explored *the significance of natural reinforcement* and encouragement in teaching kids with ASD. It was found out that when teachers and parents encouraged small achievements, children were likelier to engage in learning activities and demonstrate progress.

The study of Ola-Williams et al. (2024) explored the function of *parental participation and encouragement* in the learning experiences of kids with ASD. It was found out that children whose parents actively encouraged their progress demonstrated higher levels of achievement in social skills and academic tasks. The study emphasizes how crucial a nurturing home environment is for encouraging success through constant support.

O'Donoghue et al. (2024) revealed that children who received consistent feedback and encouragement showed more substantial progress in communication and social skills than those who did not. This underscores the significance of structured, encouraging environments in facilitating achievement for children with ASD.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the central role that parental collaboration and guided support play in enhancing the educational outcomes of children with Special Educational Needs (SENs), particularly those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Parents in this study consistently followed up on their children's academic tasks, supported them with homework, and maintained close coordination with teachers practices that align with global research emphasizing the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration. According to Stahmer et al. (2024), collaborative approaches between general and special education teachers, when combined with active parental

involvement, significantly improve academic performance and behavioral outcomes for students with ASD. Furthermore, Al Jaffal (2022) noted that when parents and educators work together to implement individualized education plans (IEPs), students benefit from more consistent and responsive support systems. These findings suggest that continued investment in school-parent partnerships, along with the development of accessible learning resources, is essential for promoting inclusion and equity in special education.

Equally important is the theme of progress through encouragement, where participants described noticeable improvements in their children's academic engagement and behavior when efforts were consistently supported and positively reinforced. This resonates with the study of Fernández Cerero et al. (2024), which found that positive reinforcement significantly enhances learning outcomes and motivation among children with ASD. Moreover, Sonnenschein et al. (2021) demonstrated that natural encouragement whether from teachers or parents promotes sustained interest and participation in learning tasks. These studies reinforce the notion that recognizing small achievements builds self-confidence and resilience, helping children overcome setbacks and develop critical life skills. In environments where emotional support and encouragement are routinely provided, students with SENs are more likely to reach developmental milestones and experience long-term academic and social success. As shown in this study and supported by O'Donoghue et al. (2024), structured and nurturing feedback systems are foundational for unlocking the potential of children with SENs, particularly in resource-limited settings like Bohol.

5. Conclusion

This study underscores the vital role parents play in the educational journey of children with Special Educational Needs (SENs), particularly in contexts where systemic support may be limited. Through a phenomenological approach, the lived experiences of parents from San Isidro Elementary School revealed deep insights into their caregiving practices, emotional challenges, and resilience. The themes that emerged such as guided support, concern over unequal progress, and achievement through encouragement highlight the complex, yet empowering, roles parents assume in nurturing their children's development. Parental engagement, consistent follow-up on academic tasks, and collaboration with educators have proven to be crucial in addressing learning gaps and fostering meaningful progress, especially for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Despite facing emotional, financial, and systemic challenges, parents demonstrate remarkable adaptability and commitment. Their proactive involvement not only facilitates academic gains but also promotes emotional stability and social inclusion for their children. The findings emphasize the need for strengthened school-family partnerships, accessible intervention programs, and tailored support systems to ensure that every child with SEN receives equitable and holistic care.

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