

# CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WITH ONLINE AND MODULAR LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate how Special Education (SpEd) teachers are coping with the challenges of online and modular learning brought about by the pandemic. This study utilized an online questionnaire which asked SpEd teachers from public and private schools regarding challenges and problems they encounter; coping strategies that they perform; and recommendations they may give to mitigate the problems being experienced. 43 SpEd teachers responded to the online questionnaire. The researcher also conducted a virtual focused group discussion (FGD) with 14 SpEd teachers, in attendance, to validate the responses. Among the mentioned roles of a SpEd teacher, more than half identified screening (intake of new students to the SpEd program) and choosing appropriate teaching strategies as challenging or they were able to do so after performing adjustments. Almost half of the respondents identified assessment (identifying students' performance for the school year) and creating Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) as very challenging or they were not able to do them anymore when they shifted to online learning. The most identified challenges encountered were: families lacking resources; slow/ intermittent internet connection; difficulty balancing time between teaching and family life; and students being more distracted at home. The most identified coping strategies were: seeking help from families for support, self-care tasks, time management, and praying. Most of the teachers identified having constant communication with their students' families helped in the adjustment with online learning. On the recommendations, most of the teachers mentioned that there should be more teachers to be hired especially in the public school setting, implement adequate training to help teachers perform their roles accordingly, and provide clear guidelines that will be implemented by the school administration together with the teachers and families. The study then offered suggestions to help teachers cope with online and modular learning.

**Keywords:** Special Education, Teachers, Coping, Online Learning

## 1. Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease that affects people globally. COVID 19 cases, as of the time of writing, continues to increase affecting almost 156 million people worldwide, and more than 1 million people in the Philippines. COVID 19 not just affected people's health, it has also affected people's livelihood and even the educational system.

In the Philippines, schools have closed due to the COVID 19 pandemic. This meant that more than 28 million students were affected.<sup>1</sup> But although the schools were closed, the educational

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO. (March 2021). Education: From disruption to recovery. Retrieved from: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

system shifted from face-to-face learning to online/ modular learning. This meant that the Department of Education (DepEd) of the country implemented distance learning wherein students may receive instruction through online classes, TV/ radio-based instruction, or by modular learning. The latter utilized self-learning modules or SLM based on the most essential learning competencies (MELCS) provided by DepEd.<sup>2</sup>

The shift to distance learning particularly online and modular learning affected many stakeholders.<sup>3</sup> Teachers, parents, and most especially students were affected by this shift. Among the concerns that these stakeholders have voiced are the lack of technological resources, living conditions that may not be conducive to learning, and the difficulty of balancing work of parents and teaching students at home.

These concerns are being faced by Special Education (SpEd) teachers and families of students with special educational needs. It may also be stated that these concerns may even be at a greater level as those in regular education. Most students with special needs require hands-on experiences in their learning and SpEd teachers need to individualize learning for their students. Although parents and families of students with special educational needs are already encouraged to be involved in the education process, it is a difficult task to perform the education and handling at home wherein there is lack of resources and parents lack the appropriate strategies to do so. Some students with special educational needs also manifest increased behavioral and emotional concerns at home with family members. The increase in behavioral concerns may pose difficulties in teaching them. Thus, this continues to add up to the concerns SpEd teachers need to address.

Both teachers and parents of students with special educational needs are facing challenges when the educational system shifted to online and modular learning. A study by Toquero (2021) which involved five SpEd teachers indicated that they have experienced “educational, social, and psychological difficulties and challenges.” They have encountered difficulty in the delivery of lessons since shifting the lessons they use in face-to-face classes need to be modified to be contextualized to the current needs of students learning at home. Moreover, communicating with parents was also identified as challenging by the teachers interviewed because not all have smartphones or social media accounts (Toquero, 2021). In relation to the latter, intermittent internet connection was also identified as a challenge in this study which makes lessons more limited and difficult for both teachers and parents.<sup>4</sup>

These challenges related to technology such as difficulty accessing or needing to learn how to use such are also indicated in the study by Schuck and Lambert (2020) from their interview of two Special Education teachers who shifted to emergency remote teaching. Teachers interviewed in this study mentioned that some parents of their students experienced “difficulty logging on to online portals and even getting access to the internet.” Moreover, they also stated

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<sup>2</sup> FlipScience. (2020). Nanay, handa na ba kayong maging tagapagdaloy?  
Retrieved from: <https://www.flipscience.ph/news/features-news/tagapagdaloy-modular-distance-learning/>

<sup>3</sup> Bagood, J. (2020). Teacher-learning modality under the new normal. Retrieved from: <https://pia.gov.ph/features/articles/1055584>

<sup>4</sup> Toquero, C.M.D. (2021). 'Sana All' Inclusive Education amid COVID-19: challenges, strategies, and prospects of Special Education Teachers. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences*, 10(1), 30-51. Retrieved from: <http://doi.org/10.17583/rimcis.2toquero021.6316>

that students pose various challenging behaviors while learning at home and parents or other caregivers need help in managing them (Schuck and Lambert, 2020). Lastly, teachers in this study also mentioned that both of them experience increased personal stress due to the shift of teaching from face-to-face to teaching through a screen.<sup>5</sup>

Although teachers and parents experience challenges in this change of teaching and learning process, the studies mentioned above also enumerate strategies and mechanisms that teachers use to cope with the new situation. In the study of Schuck and Lambert (2020), teachers emphasized on the importance of self-care such as making sure to disconnect from gadgets at certain times of the day. The importance of taking care of psychological safety was also a theme identified by the study of Toquero (2021). Teachers interviewed in this study emphasized that getting moral support from the parents of their students is helpful for them to gain courage in facing the challenges being encountered. Teachers also mentioned that parental engagement and regular online communication strengthens learning of students with special needs at home (Toquero, 2021).

In light of the above mentioned concerns, there is a need to identify the challenges being encountered by SpEd teachers as well as how they are coping with the shift to online and modular learning. Identifying challenges and coping strategies of SpEd teachers may help in developing programs and strategies that will address their concerns which in turn will also be beneficial to students with special educational needs and their families.

## **1.1 Objectives of the Study**

This study aimed to investigate how Special Education (SpEd) teachers are coping with the challenges of online and modular learning brought about by the pandemic.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

Specifically, this study answered the following questions:

1. What are challenges, problems, and difficulties SpEd teachers encounter in shifting from face-to-face classes to online and modular teaching?
2. What coping strategies do SpEd teachers do to mitigate the difficulties that they encounter?
3. What recommendations do SpEd teachers can give to mitigate the problems being encountered in online and modular learning?

## **2. Methods, Results and Discussion**

### **2.1 Methods**

This study used an exploratory research design to investigate the challenges being faced by Special Education teachers as well as their coping strategies to mitigate the problems being

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<sup>5</sup> Schuck, R. and Lambert, R. (2020). "Am I doing enough?" Special educators' experiences with emergency remote teaching in Spring 2020. *Education Sciences*. 10, 320. Retrieved from: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/10/11/320>

encountered. The study utilized an online questionnaire executed through Google Forms as well as a focus group discussion with selected SpEd teachers as respondents.

The researcher-made online questionnaire included three sections: basic information, challenges and problems; as well as coping strategies and recommendations. The first section asked respondents to provide name and email addresses (optional), school, years in teaching, types of students being handled, and mode of teaching. The second section asked the respondents about how they are able to perform the common roles of SpEd teachers when they shifted to online and modular learning. They were also asked to rate if each task is considered *very challenging* (unable to perform when shifted to online learning), *challenging* (able to perform but needed modifications/ adjustments that made it difficult to perform), *just ok* (able to perform with simple adjustments), *this is fine* (able to perform just like in face-to-face classes). If the task was not performed even during face-to-face classes, the respondent stated *not applicable*. The second section included a question where they will just check common challenges being encountered by SpEd teachers in online and modular learning. In addition, the section included two more open-ended questions for the respondents to talk about the challenges they encounter as well as problems being observed from families of students with special educational needs. On the third and last section, the respondents were asked to choose among common difficulties that SpEd teachers encounter. Lastly, two open-ended questions were asked for them to explain about strategies they have done to help the families and students as well as recommendations that they can give to mitigate the problems they are facing. The focus group discussion included questions based on the online questionnaire distributed.

Convenience sampling was implemented to gather data from SpEd teachers. The researcher sent out the online questionnaire to known teachers. Answering the questionnaire was voluntary. After a week, 43 SpEd teachers from public and private schools responded to the online questionnaire. 14 selected SpEd teachers attended the virtual focus group discussion conducted via Google Meet.

Twenty-three teachers came from public schools while 20 came from private settings (school, clinic, and center). Among the 43 respondents, one teacher have been teaching for more than 20 years (2%); six teachers have been teaching for 16-20 years (14%); seven teachers have been teaching for 11-15 years (16%); ten have been teaching for 6-10 years (23%); and 21 teachers have been teaching for less than 5 years (49%). Most of the respondents handle students with cognitive disabilities: 93% handle students in the Autism Spectrum Disorder; 88% handle students with intellectual disabilities; 67% handle students with Learning Disabilities; and 58% handle students with Behavioral Problems. Only a few respondents handle students with sensory impairments: 7% handle blind students; 4% handle deaf students; and 2% handle students with physical disabilities.

On modes of teaching, 26 out of 43 respondents (61%) perform online classes with individual students while 24 out 43 or 56% perform group online classes. Moreover, 56% of the respondents do modular learning. Only 7 out of 43 teachers (16%) of the respondents do home visits. The data was analyzed using triangulation. This was done by comparing data gathered from literature review, responses from the online questionnaire, and responses from the focus group discussion.

## **2.2 Results**

### **2.2.1 Common Tasks of Special Education Teachers**

The following are the results gathered from the first section of the online questionnaire on the various tasks of Special Education teachers.

#### **2.2.1.1 Screening: In Take of New Students to the SPED Program**

40 out of 43 teachers responded that they are required to perform screening tasks in their respective schools. Three teachers mentioned that they do not perform this even in face-to-face setting. Among the 40 teachers, 10 of them (25%) stated that they find screening very challenging or they are not able to perform this accordingly when they shifted to online and modular learning even when they are tasked to do so. On the other hand, 24 teachers (60%) said that they are able to perform screening tasks but they had difficulty in adjusting or modifying the tasks in order to do so. Three teachers (7.5%) mentioned that they performed minimal modifications in doing screening tasks. Lastly, one teacher (2.5%) said that he/she is able to do this just like in face-to-face classes. From the group discussion, the teachers mentioned that not all of them have standardized screening tools. The tools to identify students' present level of performance is based on policies being conducted in their division or their respective schools. A teacher mentioned that administrators' value of appropriate SpEd placement of students is a factor in the availability of appropriate tools in the school.

#### **2.2.1.2 Assessment: Identify Students' Performance Prior to the School Year**

43 out of 43 teachers responded that they are required to perform assessment tasks in their respective schools. Among the 43 teachers, 18 of them (42%) stated that they find assessment very challenging or they are not able to perform this accordingly when they shifted to online and modular learning. Teachers from the focus group discussion mentioned that lack of appropriate tools hindered them from performing assessment accordingly. They also added that they do not have an assessment tool that is adjusted to virtual assessment. Some teachers also mentioned that even if they want to perform home visits in order to perform assessment accordingly, they are not able to do so due to community quarantine restrictions. On the other hand, 15 teachers (35%) said that they are able to perform screening tasks but they had difficulty in adjusting or modifying the tasks in order to do so. Seven teachers (16%) mentioned that they performed minimal modifications in doing screening tasks. Lastly, three teachers (7%) said that they are able to do assessment just like in face-to-face classes.

#### **2.2.1.3 Program Planning: Creating an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP)**

One of out 43 respondents mentioned that he/she does not make an IEP even in face-to-face setting. That means 42 teachers are tasked to create programs for their students. However, among the 42 teachers, 16 (38%) found program planning very challenging. That means, they are not able to do so during online and modular learning. Some teachers mentioned that they are not able to update or create an IEP anymore because they have a lot of other tasks in school. Most of the teachers mentioned that besides doing roles expected of a SpEd teacher, they are also expected to perform tasks of regular education teachers in their respective schools. This means that their teaching load involves making learning modules, instructional videos for students, and even completing forms required of all teachers especially those in public schools. Some teachers also mentioned that making an IEP is a very tedious task and since families are

not even aware of the utilization of individualized plans thus teachers do not bother themselves in making such plans. Moreover, 15 teachers (35%) mentioned that they are still able to perform program planning but deemed this task difficult to modify. On the other hand, seven teachers (16%) stated that program planning is easy for them and were able to adjust to online and modular learning mode. Three teachers (7%) did not have to adjust their program planning tasks to online learning as they are able to perform this just like in face-to-face setting.

#### **2.2.1.4 Choosing Appropriate Teaching Strategies**

All 43 respondents mentioned that part of their role as a SpEd teacher is choosing appropriate teaching strategies for their students. Out of the 43, only 9 teachers (21%) found this very challenging or they are not able to do this accordingly when they shifted to online and modular learning. 23 teachers (54%) identified this task as doable but challenging. The teachers mentioned that the challenges they encounter in choosing appropriate strategies stem from available resources for them and their students as well as knowledge in strategies that are appropriate for online learning. A factor that they mentioned is that they need to be trained more in order to adjust their teaching to the new learning environment which is online mode. Out of the 43 respondents, five (12%) mentioned that they did minimal modifications in choosing appropriate strategies for their students. Moreover, six teachers (14%) said that they perform such task just like during face-to-face setting. Lastly, most teachers mentioned that guidelines related to teaching strategies customized for different students with special educational needs may be helpful in providing such service for students and their families.

#### **2.2.1.5 Modifying Lessons for Students in Inclusive Setting**

Forty-one out of 43 respondents mentioned that modifying lessons for students in an inclusive setting is part of their role as a SpEd teacher. Two of them are not required to do so. Among the 41 respondents, 11 teachers (27%) stated that modifying lessons is not something that they are able to do during online and modular learning. A reason pointed out by the teachers is that they are overwhelmed with the amount of tasks being done. Another reason is that they seek the help of the regular education teacher assigned to the student but sometimes the appropriate modifications are still not conducted. 16 teachers (39%) mentioned that they are able to modify lessons despite the difficulties being encountered. They also mentioned that modifying lessons is also based on the load of lessons taught to students. They have stated that even if the learning competencies were decreased, the students still have to complete modules expected of those in inclusive settings. Some teachers mentioned that since parents are the ones teaching the students, sometimes, the modules are not completed accordingly. Also, teachers mentioned that the availability of a modified curriculum for students with special educational needs may be helpful for them to perform modifications. On the other hand, nine teachers (22%) mentioned that they are able to modify lessons with minimal adjustment on their part while five teachers (12%) are able to do this task easily and similar to face-to-face setting.

#### **2.2.1.6 Making Progress Reports**

All 43 respondents mentioned that they are required to make progress reports. Among the 43 respondents, only seven (16%) identified this as being very challenging while 17 (40%) stated that this task is challenging. Thus, they are able to do this with moderate difficulty. 30% or 13 teachers identified making progress reports as doable with very minimal modifications while 14% or six teachers identified this task as similar to what they have been doing in face-to-face.

### **2.2.1.7 Communicating with Parents**

Two respondents mentioned that they are not required to communicate with parents regularly as part of their role as SpEd teachers in their respective schools. Among the 41 teachers, six of them (15%) mentioned that this role is very challenging, thus, they are unable to do this during online and modular learning. A reason that was mentioned was partly because of the fact that parents were more unavailable because of their current schedule. 15 teachers (37%) stated that they are able to communicate with parents despite the challenges of schedule and overwhelming tasks. On the other hand, nine teachers (22%) identified this task as doable with minimal modifications and lastly, 11 teachers (27%) are able to communicate with parents regularly just like how they do this during pre-pandemic. Teachers from the group discussion mentioned that they are able to make use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram when communicating with parents of their students.

### **2.2.2 Challenges and Problems Encountered**

“Families I teach lack resources” was identified by 24 out of 43 teachers (56%) as the challenge being most encountered. Second to this is “I have slow or intermittent internet connection” which was identified by 21 teachers (49%). Next to this are two statements, both identified by 18 teachers (42%): “I have difficulty using technology” and “My students lack motivation in learning or are not interested anymore.” The fifth statement identified as a challenge was “I lack resources to use in teaching.” This was identified by 17 teachers (40%). Other statements on challenges encountered were identified by 35% down to 12% of the respondents: “Families are not involved in the students' education” (35%); “I have difficulty making contact with my students' parents/families” (21%); “I lack gadgets to use” (19%); “I still have difficulty using technology” (14%); and “I share gadgets with my family” (12%).

The open-ended questions on challenges and difficulties being encountered by teachers when they shifted to online and modular learning validates the chosen statements. The teachers in the group discussion also mentioned that resources, technology (internet connection and gadgets), and students' motivation are identified challenges during online and modular learning. Moreover, the responses of the teachers also identified lack of balance between work and personal life especially for teachers who are also parents working at home with their children studying at home with them is an identified challenge for many. Some teachers mentioned that they experience anxiety due to the overwhelming tasks that they need to perform. Moreover, most of the teachers also mentioned that students have a shorter attention span and get easily distracted during online classes while at home. Students also lack social interaction due to not being at school. Lastly, other challenges mentioned by the teachers in the open-ended questions as well as in the group discussion were lack of support from administrators as well as teachers and parents needing training (both in technology usage and teaching strategies) to be more efficient in this new learning mode.

### **2.2.3 Coping Strategies and Recommendations Given by SpEd Teachers**

Among the coping strategies and recommendations, “asking parents/ families for their support” was identified by 35 teachers (81%) as a method to mitigate the difficulties being encountered. In this light, the teachers shared that regular communication with families not just help the parents but also help themselves as well. Since this gives both parties a shared responsibility towards the education of the student with special educational needs, regular communication was also identified as giving a sense of encouragement for both teachers and parents. Regular communication was emphasized by many as being an avenue to teach strategies to parents and answer their queries about their child.

Second to asking parents/ families for support is “self-care tasks like exercise and taking breaks” which was identified by 34 teachers (79%). The third strategy identified by the teachers as a coping strategy for them is “time management” which was mentioned by 32 teachers (74%). Other coping strategies were also identified as being performed by 50-60% teachers: “finding and participating in webinars to gain information” (65%); “talking to my co-teachers for emotional support” (61%); “talking to my co-teachers/ administrators for helpful information” (61%); talking to my family for emotional support” (53%).

The open-ended questions and even the group discussion identified “praying” or “engaging in any spiritual wellness activity” as a coping strategy by most respondents. Some of the respondents also indicated that having a certain form of relaxation/ recreation or break is needed to maintain motivation for work. Some of them mentioned that they reward themselves or give themselves a treat at the end of the week of any task that has required a lot of effort from them. Lastly, some mentioned that having a positive mindset helps in coping with the challenges being encountered.

On the recommendations, most teachers mentioned that hiring more SpEd teachers will help in addressing the needs and concerns of students with special educational needs especially in the public school setting. Most teachers also mentioned that the overwhelming amount of other tasks such as forms are also not helping teachers focus on their roles as SpEd teachers. Moreover, teachers identified that there should be a strong support system from school administrators. They should be the ones who are knowledgeable of SpEd policies in order to provide better opportunities for students with special educational needs and teachers as well as to implement Inclusive Education better. With such, this would also pave the way to giving equal opportunities for SpEd teachers like attending training and webinars related to professional development.

### **2.3. Discussion**

This study provided information that may be used by future researchers in identifying the challenges being encountered and coping strategies being performed by Special Education teachers. Some of the challenges identified in this study were related to lack of resources and those related to technology such as slow internet connection. These findings are similar with the findings of Toquero (2021) wherein she stated that teachers experience intermittent virtual socializations and parents need help regarding online communication and homeschooling. Moreover, lack of resources and access to technology which are identified as challenges in this study are similar to the study of Schuck and Lambert (2020). On the other hand, the coping strategies identified in this study were also similar with Toquero’s (2021) findings regarding



parental engagement and psychological safety<sup>6</sup> as well as Schuck and Lambert which identified that special education teachers now rely on families and parents for support to educate the child with special educational needs (2020).<sup>7</sup>

The data gathered in this study may also be used by administrators and other personnel concerned with developing webinars and training manuals that will benefit SpEd teachers as well as parents of students with special educational needs. Webinars may include wellness programs for teachers and families which may include, but not limited to the following topics: proper time management, recreational activities that can be performed that targets overall well-being, using technology efficiently through interactive websites and available learning resources, and establishing support groups with specific objectives.

The information gathered in this study may also be used as a basis for reviewing current SpEd guidelines and practices both in public and private school settings. This may include developing and improving guidelines related to the different roles of SpEd teachers mentioned in this study namely: screening, assessment, program planning, choosing appropriate strategies, modifying lessons, making progress reports, and communicating with parents. The information provided in this study may also be used in reviewing current practices related to Inclusive Education in various educational institutions in order to help students with special educational needs, SpEd teachers, families, and even regular education teachers involved in the Inclusion program.

Moreover, the data gathered in this study may also be used as a baseline for other research. This study was exploratory in nature thus only used triangulation as a data analysis method since the purpose of the study was to explain a phenomenon being experienced by SpEd teachers as they shifted from face-to-face to online and modular learning. Other researchers may utilize a more in-depth data collection and data analysis method in order to provide more information that can be used in developing programs that will further benefit SpEd teachers in their facilitation of various roles and tasks in teaching students with special educational needs and being an efficient member of implementing Inclusive Education.

### 3. Conclusion

Due to the shift in online and modular learning, some of the roles expected from the Special Education (SpEd) teachers are not performed anymore due to the limitations being encountered. There are roles of SpEd teachers that are still being performed even during online and modular learning but require modifications to meet the demands of the current situation. It is essential to determine the challenges being encountered by SpEd teachers in order to provide activities that will help them and in turn, benefit the students and the families that they cater to. Moreover, finding out the coping strategies of SpEd teachers is also necessary in order to provide for training and clear guidelines that will continue to help them professionally and that addresses their needs and concerns. These guidelines and policies should also be communicated to school administration in order to ensure proper implementation.

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<sup>6</sup> Toquero, C.M.D. (2021). 'Sana All' Inclusive Education amid COVID-19: challenges, strategies, and prospects of Special Education Teachers. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences*, 10(1), 30-51. doi: 10.17583/rimcis.2021.6316. Retrieved from: <http://doi.org/10.17583/rimcis.2021.6316>

<sup>7</sup> Schuck, R. and Lambert, R. (2020). "Am I doing enough?" Special educators' experiences with emergency remote teaching in Spring 2020. *Education Sciences*. 10, 320. Retrieved from: [www.mdpi.com/journal/education](http://www.mdpi.com/journal/education)

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