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SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE NEW NORMAL: EMBRACING DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the adaptation and challenges in special education during distance learning to develop a comprehensive continuity plan. Participants included three administrators and 15 teachers from special education schools in Cabanatuan City, along with 150 parents during the 2021-2022 school year at Cabanatuan East Central School, Lazaro Francisco Integrated School, and Camp Tinio Elementary School.

Using a descriptive research method, the researchers created a questionnaire as the main data collection tool, which was validated for reliability. Data analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), employing frequency counts and percentages to profile respondents. Weighted mean values were applied to assess adjustments, challenges, and support in special education distance learning.

The findings reveal the effective implementation of modified practices in special education, covering instructional, curricular, and administrative areas. Administrators and teachers rated the challenges of executing the special education learning continuity plan as moderately difficult, while parents found them slightly challenging, emphasizing the significant efforts of teachers and administrators in helping parents and students comply with the plan.

The researchers recommends a continuity plan designed to benefit administrators, special education teachers and parents with the goal of improving the educational experience for this group.

KEYWORDS: *Special Education, Distance Learning, Adaptation, Challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Special Education (SPED) provides programs and services tailored to meet the needs of students with disabilities, helping them reach their full potential (DepEd Order No. 44, Section 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the education system, including SPED. Transitioning from traditional face-to-face instruction to distance learning for safety reasons has posed challenges in achieving the desired learning outcomes for students with special needs.

A key element of SPED is the establishment of routines to maximize student potential. The shift to distance learning has required modifying these routines, originally developed for face-to-face settings, to suit remote learning environments. In response, the Department of Education (DepEd) has developed the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) for SPED to ensure students with special needs continue their education in the "new normal" (Malipot, 2020).

DepEd's "Inclusive Education" policy allocates resources to support special education, including Self-Learning Modules (SLMs) as alternative learning tools (Malipot, 2021). While various learning modalities—such as modular, television, radio-based, blended, and online instruction—are available for mainstream education, delivering these to SPED learners presents unique challenges, especially in maintaining physical interaction, which is vital for socialization (Bautista et al., 2022; Sadia, 2020).

SPED teachers play a crucial role in guiding students through their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) (Nelson, 2019). The growing number of special needs learners highlights the need for flexible learning solutions, particularly for immunocompromised students, as face-to-face classes may not be safe (DepEd, 2020; Caballa, ALRES-Phils). Caballa emphasizes that discontinuing education for SPED learners risks academic and behavioral regression, making parent involvement essential in this new setup where teachers act as facilitators, and parents take the lead in the learning process.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to describe the modifications and challenges of Special Education and to come up with the program in the learning continuity plan in Distance Learning of Special Education Program, in the New Normal.

The research sought to answer the following:

1. How may the profile of the respondents be described in terms of:
   - 1.1 administrator
     - 1.1.1 sex;
     - 1.1.2 age; and
     - 1.1.3 length of service?

   11. SPED teacher
     - 1.1.4 sex;
     - 1.1.5 age;
     - 1.1.6 length of service as SPED Teacher; and
     - 1.2.4 number of class handles?

   - 1.2 Parents
     - 1.2.1 age;

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1.2.2 number of their children with special educational needs;
1.2.3 number of hours assisting their children with special educational needs; and
1.2.4 occupation?

2. How may the modifications of practices in Special Education program being adopted in the distance learning education be described in terms of:
2.1 instructions;
2.2 curriculum; and
2.3 administration?

3. How may the challenges in the implementation of learning continuity plan for Special Education be described as encountered by:
3.1. administrator;
3.2 SPED teachers : and
3.3 parents

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to investigate the integration of distance education for special education in Division of Cabanatuan City schools during the 2021–2022 academic year. According to Johnson and Christensen (2023), descriptive research focuses on collecting quantifiable data to facilitate statistical analysis of a representative sample, enabling the identification of patterns, correlations, and trends. This approach commonly employs methods such as surveys, polling, and experimental procedures to achieve these objectives.

Given the study's aim to explore profiles and modifications associated with distance education, the chosen research design was deemed appropriate. The use of survey questionnaires, often complemented by Likert Scales for response measurement, aligns with the principles of descriptive research methodology.

Moreover, the research design's emphasis on deriving numerical insights over time enhances its suitability for uncovering patterns, relationships, and trends. This study seeks to elucidate the perspectives of some stakeholders— special education (SPED) teachers ,school administrators and parents —regarding the variables outlined in the Statement of the Problem, thereby ensuring a comprehensive understanding of
the study.

Respondents

The respondents in this study were administrators ,SPED teachers and parents in the Division of Cabanatuan City. The researchers used total enumeration to determine the number of administrators , SPED teachers and parents . Total population sampling is a purposive sampling technique that examines the entire population (i.e., the total population) with a particular set of characteristics (Dissertation.laerd.com, 2022).

Table 1
Distribution of Respondents

Schools	School Administrators	SPED Teachers	Parents
Lazaro Francisco Elementary School	1	4	40
Cabanatuan East Central School	1	9	90
Camp Tinio Elementary School	1	15	150
TOTAL	**3**	**15**	**150**

As shown in table, each of the three Elementary Schools offers a Special Education Program consisting of three (3) school administrators, fifteen (15) SPED teachers and one hundred fifty (150) parents, making a total of one hundred sixty -eight (168) respondents.

Table 2
Verbal Description and Interpretation of the Mean for Modifications of Practices in Special Education Program

Range	Verbal Description	Verbal Interpretation
3.25-4.00	Well implemented	Practices are exceptionally executed, benefiting students significantly.
2.50-3.24	Implemented	Practices are satisfactory, with room for improvement, but they aid students' educational journey.
1.75-2.49	Poorly Implemented	Practices do not meet expectations, requiring substantial improvement to better support students.
1.00-1.74	Not Implemented	Practices are absent or minimal, necessitating urgent action to support students' needs.

Research Instrument

The researchers employed a questionnaire as the primary data collection tool, divided into two sections. Part I gathered demographic information from respondents, while Part II focused on specific aspects of special education in distance learning.

Administrators and SPED teachers were surveyed about adaptations made to special education practices and challenges faced in the teaching-learning process. Parents on the other hand, responded to questions related to challenges encountered during the teaching-learning process.

The questionnaire, consisting of 50 items, directly addressed the research questions. These questions were developed based on existing research in the fields of distance education and special education.

Data Collection

The researchers first obtained permission from the Schools Division Superintendent of DepEd, Division of Cabanatuan City, followed by approvals from the Public Schools District Supervisor (PSDS) of Cabanatuan City District and the principals

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of Lazaro Francisco Elementary School, Cabanatuan East Central School, and Camp Tinio Elementary School. The final approval was sought from the SPED teachers. This authorization enabled the researchers to administer the survey questionnaires to the respondents during their free time.

The researchers personally facilitated the survey to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the results. This approach also allowed the teachers to address any questions or concerns about the study. SPED teachers and parents of learners with special educational needs (LSENs) participated by completing the survey, which focused on SPED practices in distance learning. Additionally, the researchers utilized the opportunity to conduct virtual informal interviews and observations involving SPED teachers, parents, and school administrators to enrich the study's findings.

To gather data from SPED teachers, parents, and school administrators regarding special education in distance learning, the researchers adhered to systematic procedures: securing the necessary permissions from relevant authorities .

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Profile

The study involved three groups of respondents: administrators, SPED teachers, and parents of children with special educational needs. Administrators were all female, aged between 41 and 50. Their years of service ranged from 21 to 26 years. SPED Teachers were predominantly female (93.33%). Their ages varied, with a significant portion aged between 31 and 50. Most had 6-10 years of experience as SPED teachers and handled 4 classes. Parents were primarily aged between 31 and 50, with a significant number in the 41-50 age group. Most had one child with special educational needs and spent 1-2 hours daily assisting them. Their occupations were diverse, with self-employment and being a housewife being the most common.

2. Modifications of Practices in Special Education Program Being Adopted in Distance Learning Education

2.1 Instructions

Modification of Instructions of Special Education Teachers in Distance Learning

Items/Statements	Mean	Verbal Description
1. I talk to parents about setting up distance learning modality to families for the development of IEP using available resources.	3.87	Well Implemented
2. I create instructional videos for learners with special educational needs in giving support in different activities.	3.40	Well Implemented
3.I offer alternative activities for learners with special educational needs using available materials at home.	3.73	Well Implemented
4. I offer online consultation with parents in monitoring IEP of their child.	3.20	Well Implemented
5. I explain to the parents the modifications in the modules.	3.67	Well Implemented
General Mean	**3.57**	**Well Implemented**

The study highlights the effectiveness of instructional modifications adopted by Special Education (SPED) teachers in distance learning during the pandemic. Item 1, which emphasizes collaboration with parents to set up distance learning for Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), achieved the highest weighted mean of 3.87, described as "well implemented." Conversely, Item 4, involving online consultations with parents to monitor IEPs, received the lowest weighted mean of 3.20 but was still classified as "well implemented." The overall mean score of 3.57 indicates that SPED teachers successfully adapted instructional practices for distance learning.

Hanover Research Group (2020) underscores the importance of close collaboration between teachers and families in determining effective distance learning methods, recognizing families' critical role in supporting students. The Department of Education (DepEd) introduced alternative learning modalities, such as online and modular approaches, to maintain access to SPED services during the pandemic (Vicente & Revilla, 2022). Technology was instrumental, particularly for learners with autism.

Flexible learning emerged as a solution to address connectivity challenges, offering students options in learning pace, place, and mode (Gordon, 2014). This approach emphasizes learner-centered practices, especially for Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSENs), who require a flexible curriculum that considers technology access, learning styles, and diverse assessments (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013; Gachago et al., 2018). Balancing basic competencies with curriculum outcomes remains a key challenge in distance education for SPED learners.

2.2 Curriculum

SPED Teachers' Modifications of Practices in Special Education Program in Terms of Curriculum

Items/Statements	Mean	Verbal Description
1. I provide contextualized modules to LSENs based on their needs and abilities.	3.67	Well Implemented
2. I adjust the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to suit the needs and abilities of LSENs for the distance learning.	3.87	Well Implemented
3.I design daily activities applicable for learners with special educational needs to do at home.	3.87	Well Implemented
4. I use the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) as guide in developing/basis of the IEPs.	3.87	Well Implemented
5. I evaluate IEP and break learning targets into manageable lesson.	3.87	Well Implemented
General Mean	**3.83**	**Well Implemented**

The findings reveal that Special Education (SPED) teachers effectively implemented curriculum modifications for distance learning. Items 2, 3, 4, and 5, which include adjusting Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), designing home-based activities, using the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) as guides, and breaking down learning targets into

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manageable lessons, each achieved the highest weighted mean of 3.87, described as "well implemented." Item 1, involving the provision of contextualized modules for Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSENs), received the lowest weighted mean of 3.67 but was still classified as "well implemented." Overall, the average weighted mean of 3.83 confirms the successful adaptation of curriculum practices by SPED teachers in distance learning.

Kamil Lubiński and Dominik Krzysztof Tama (2021) highlight the advantages of distance learning, such as time and cost savings. However, they note that traditional, in-person education often appears more student-centered, reflecting the challenges of fully replicating such benefits in a remote learning environment.

2.3 Administration

Administrators' Modifications of Practices Being Adopted in the Distance Learning Education in Terms of Administration

Items/Statements	Mean	Verbal Description
1.I monitor individualized schedules for LSENs prepared by the SPED teachers for distance learning.	4.00	Well Implemented
2.I guide the teacher handling LSENs in distance learning.	3.33	Well Implemented
3.I prepare and implement an Action Plan for SPED teachers in distance learning of LSENs.	3.67	Well Implemented
4.I communicate with teachers to support the execution of the learning continuity of distance learning education.	4.00	Well Implemented
5.I provide webinars for SPED teachers with skills and competencies needed for distance learning.	3.67	Well Implemented
General Mean	**3.73**	**Well Implemented**

The findings indicate that administrators effectively implemented modifications to support distance learning. Items 1 and 4, which involve monitoring individualized schedules for LSENs prepared by SPED teachers and maintaining communication with teachers to support learning continuity, both achieved the highest weighted mean of 4.0, described as "well implemented." Meanwhile, item 2, guiding teachers handling LSENs, received the lowest weighted mean of 3.33 but was still classified as "well implemented." Overall, with an average weighted mean of 3.73, the modifications in administrative practices for distance learning were successfully implemented.

Zincirli (2021) highlights that while distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic had both positive and negative aspects, significant challenges included limited Internet access, inadequate technical infrastructure, and shortages of computers or tablets, which impacted the effectiveness of remote education.

3. Challenges in the Implementation of Learning Continuity Plan for Special Education

Challenges in the Implementation of Learning Continuity Plan for Special Education be Described as Encountered by the Administrators

Items/Statements	Mean	Verbal Description
1.I find it difficult supporting my SPED teachers on how to craft their IEPs.	1.00	Not Challenging
2.It is hard to look for a way in meeting online the SPED team to help children with special needs.	1.00	Not Challenging
3. I am challenge to monitor and evaluate the goals and objectives set by the teachers based on IEP because of distance learning modality.	1.33	Not Challenging
4. I exert effort in making a strategic plan with teachers handling LSENs.	1.67	Not Challenging
5. It is challenging helping those families of learners with special educational needs.	1.00	Not Challenging
General Mean	**1.20**	**Not Challenging**

The study found that administrators faced minimal challenges in implementing the learning continuity plan for Special Education. Tasks such as creating strategic plans with teachers and supporting SPED teachers in crafting IEPs were perceived as "not challenging." This suggests that administrators possess the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively address the challenges associated with distance learning for students with special needs. These findings align with the four strategic thrusts identified by Rabor et al. (2022), which emphasize the importance of focused interventions, ongoing support, and effective communication with stakeholders.

Challenges in the Implementation of Learning Continuity Plan for Special Education as Encountered by the Special Education Teachers

Items/Statements	Mean	Verbal Description
1.I find it difficult in communicating with parents.	2.87	Moderately Challenging
2. It is hard for me to make the IEP more personalized in distance learning.	3.00	Moderately Challenging
3. I exert more efforts in distance learning modality.	3.53	Very challenging
4. It is laborious in assessing the performance tasks of LSENs.	3.13	Moderately Challenging
5. It is tough adjusting lessons for LSENs in distance learning.	3.07	Moderately Challenging
General Mean	**3.12**	**Moderately Challenging**

The study revealed that Special Education teachers encountered various challenges in implementing the learning continuity plan. The most significant challenge was the exertion of extra effort in distance learning modalities, rated as "very challenging." Other challenges, such as communication with parents and the overall implementation of the plan, were considered "moderately challenging." These findings align with the potential benefits of technology in education, as highlighted by Bruno (2021). While technology can offer personalized learning experiences and multiple ways to demonstrate understanding, it is crucial to

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consider the specific needs of students with special education and provide appropriate accommodations and support.

Challenges in the Implementation of Learning Continuity Plan for Special Education as Encountered by the Parents

Items/Statements	Mean	Verbal Description
1.I find it hard to communicate with my child's teachers.	1.27	Not Challenging
2.We have limited resources at home to provide alternative learning materials for distance learning.	1.75	Slightly Challenging
3.It is difficult to balance the demands added to my work and the needed guidance for my child's learning.	2.18	Slightly Challenging
4. It is hard to use technology or to access the internet in consulting with my child's teachers about his/her lessons.	1.82	Slightly Challenging
5. I have difficult time teaching my child the necessary skills for him / her to learn.	2.35	Slightly Challenging
General Mean	**1.87**	**Slightly Challenging**

The study revealed that parents of children with special educational needs faced moderate challenges in implementing the learning continuity plan. The most significant challenge was teaching their children necessary skills, rated as "slightly challenging." However, communication with their child's teachers was perceived as "not challenging." These findings align with the challenges identified by Agaton and Cueto (2021), such as difficulties in virtual learning, instructional delivery, and financial constraints. While communication between parents and teachers seems to be effective, further support is needed to assist parents in providing effective home-based instruction for their children with special needs.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the following are concluded:

1. The profiles of the respondents reveal that the majority of SPED administrators and teachers are female, within the age range of 41-50, and possess significant years of service. Most of the parents fall within the same age group, 41-50.
2. In terms of the Special Education program's adaptation for distance learning, the modifications were effectively implemented. Notably, improvements were observed in instruction, curriculum adaptation, and administrative support. These changes were supported by strong communication with parents and efficient monitoring of individualized learning schedules.
3. The primary challenges in implementing the learning continuity plan for Special Education included difficulties in crafting Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for administrators and SPED teachers. Additionally, both groups found distance learning to be particularly demanding. For parents, the most significant challenge was teaching their children necessary skills.

Based on the proceedings of the research, the following are recommended:

1. It is recommended to maintain and strengthen the communication practices with parents and the effective monitoring of individualized schedules, as these strategies have proven successful. Further enhancements should be explored to ensure sustained engagement and continued support.
2. Additionally, targeted training and resources should be provided for administrators and SPED teachers to streamline the process of developing IEPs for distance learning. Creating specialized support programs to ease the burden on parents and offer more effective teaching strategies for essential skills should also be considered.
3. Given the significant challenges faced by parents in teaching necessary skills to their children with special needs during distance learning, it is recommended to establish comprehensive support programs. These programs should provide parents with guidance, training, and resources to enhance their capacity as educators in a remote learning environment.

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