

Out-Of-Field Teaching: English As SPED Teachers Lived Experiences

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Abstract — Out-of-field teaching remains a persistent issue in education, especially when teachers are assigned to teach and support students with disabilities in Special Education (SPED) classrooms without the necessary training or qualifications. This study explores the lived experiences of two out-of-field English teachers in SPED, focusing on the challenges they encounter, their coping strategies, and the impact on their professional development. The research utilized qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, to gather data on the challenges, strategies, and support systems that were accessed by the participants. Despite the lack of specialized training, both teachers demonstrated resilience by adapting their teaching strategies and relying on resourcefulness, creativity, and collaboration with SPED experts. Results revealed that a major challenge was adapting lessons to meet the diverse needs of students, compounded by the lack of training in SPED pedagogy. Both participants emphasized the importance of support mechanisms such as professional development programs and collaboration with experienced SPED teachers. Their dedication and perseverance underscore the need for continuous support, targeted training, and adequate resources to enhance teacher performance and improve student outcomes in SPED classrooms. The findings suggest that, with proper support, out-of-field teachers in SPED settings can still make a meaningful impact on student learning. Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of teacher preparation, collaboration, and professional development in fostering inclusive education for students with special needs.

Keywords —out-of-field teaching, Special Education (SPED), English teachers, teaching challenges, coping strategies, professional development, lived experiences, inclusive education

I. INTRODUCTION

“You cannot give what you don't have.” This quote implies that teachers are most effective when they teach subjects they are both knowledgeable and passionate about rather than teaching subjects they are unfamiliar with. This idea resonates with the issue of out-of-field teaching, defined as assigning teachers to disciplines outside their expertise [1]. In the Philippines, this phenomenon is widespread—62% of public high school instructors reportedly teach outside their specialization [2], highlighting a systemic challenge that compromises educational quality. The main factors contributing to this practice include shortages of graduates in specific fields, lack of subject majors in certain localities, and reassignments or misalignments made by school administrators or government placement processes [3][4]. As a result, teachers are often placed in roles they are unprepared for, which hinders both their competence and student learning outcomes [5].

Inclusive education, which seeks to provide equitable opportunities for all learners regardless of background or disability, further complicates this issue. Global efforts such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) have shaped policies worldwide, influencing the Philippines' Republic Act No. 11650, which ensures support and equal access to education for learners with disabilities. The Department of Education (DepEd), in partnership with UNESCO, has implemented training programs to prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms. However, the effectiveness of these programs depends heavily on teacher preparedness. Teachers play a crucial role in recognizing the diverse strengths and needs of students [6], while their responsibilities extend beyond instruction to the use of specialized equipment and collaboration with parents [7]. In special education, collaboration with multidisciplinary teams is particularly vital for addressing diverse learner needs [8].

Despite these developments, research indicates that out-of-field teaching remains a persistent challenge that undermines teacher confidence, competence, and student outcomes. Contributing factors include teacher shortages, workforce limitations, and high turnover rates [1][9]. Teachers assigned outside their expertise often struggle with subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge [10][11], leading to reduced confidence, reliance on limited strategies, and heightened stress [12][13][9][14]. These challenges contribute to burnout and attrition while also raising concerns about the preparedness of the students they teach.

Nevertheless, research also points to the resilience and adaptability of out-of-field teachers. While many face difficulties in lesson preparation, classroom delivery, and assessment [15], they often develop coping strategies, pursue continuous professional development, and employ flexible methods such as technology integration, group activities, role-playing, and multimedia tools [4][10][16]. During the pandemic, teachers demonstrated creativity through interactive games, reinforcement techniques, and reward systems to sustain engagement among learners with special needs [15][17]. These adaptive efforts reflect the potential for professional growth when educators are provided with adequate support, training, and recognition [9][18][19].

In this context, the study “*Out-of-Field Teaching: English as SPED Teachers' Lived Experiences*” investigates the realities of English teachers assigned to Special Education (SPED) without specialized training. While many are underprepared to support learners with disabilities [20], little is known about their lived experiences. This study aims to identify the obstacles they face, examine the effects on their performance and job satisfaction, and explore the coping strategies they employ. By addressing these concerns, the research not only fills a gap in literature but also supports global goals such as SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), while aligning with the Philippines' *Ambisyon Natin 2040* vision for a secure and inclusive future [21].

II. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the lived experiences of English teachers designated to teach in Special Education (SPED) without formal specialization. Qualitative designs allow for deeper exploration of real-world contexts, making it suitable for examining teachers' challenges, strategies, support systems, and motivation [22]. Conducted in Mandaue City and Cebu City, the study focused on SPED schools where shortages of qualified teachers resulted in out-of-field teaching assignments. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria requiring an English degree, at least one year of SPED teaching, and no formal SPED training. Data saturation was reached after two participants, coded as

Teacher A and Teacher B, who shared diverse backgrounds but common experiences of teaching learners with special needs.

Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview guide, audio recordings, and researcher facilitation. The guide elicited insights on challenges, coping mechanisms, support, and motivation, while its flexible format allowed probing questions. With consent, one interview was conducted face-to-face and the other online, both lasting about 40 minutes. Audio recordings were transcribed and notes reviewed for accuracy. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework [23], was applied to identify patterns across responses. Codes were generated from transcripts, grouped into categories, and refined into broader themes that captured the essence of participants' lived experiences.

The study adhered to strict ethical standards. Participants gave informed consent and were assured of confidentiality through coding and secure handling of data, which were later deleted. Care was taken to remain sensitive and impartial, with transcript checks and triangulation ensuring accuracy. A small token of appreciation was provided without influencing participation, helping safeguard the teachers while reinforcing the study's credibility.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section explores the experiences of Teacher A and Teacher B, out-of-field English teachers in SPED, highlighting key themes: challenges faced, adaptation strategies, support systems, and the impact on their teaching motivation.

Theme 1: Challenges Encountered by Out-of-Field English Teachers in SPED

1.1 Adjustment and Modification of the Curriculum

Both participants/teachers manage different classes where Teacher A handles students who have hearing impairment meanwhile Teacher B handles most students with intellectual disabilities. Despite the differences in the nature of their students' disabilities, the underlying difficulty in adapting their instructional methods and content was strikingly similar, highlighting the universal challenges of modifying the curriculum to make learning accessible for all students in Special Education.

Teacher A then expressed her difficulties of aligning the curriculum with the unique needs of her students. She highlighted the difficulty of mastering sign language, which is essential for effective communication and instruction in her class.

"Basically, since I'm handling HI (hearing impairment), learning how to do the sign language and adjustment with the curriculum because we have target competencies in specific grade level and you will have to make a great adjustment towards teaching that specific content to the HI or probably the SPED students in general," Teacher A explained.

In addition to learning sign language, Teacher B discussed the difficulty of adjusting her teaching methods to meet the competency requirements for specific grade levels. She emphasized that this transition involved making significant adjustments to ensure the curriculum was both accessible and meaningful to her students, requiring tailored approaches for effective understanding and application. Teachers working outside their areas of expertise face major challenges in lesson planning, particularly when the content is unfamiliar [24]. Teacher B echoed this, sharing her struggles in modifying lessons for SPED students. Unlike regular classrooms that follow a standardized curriculum, SPED classrooms require adjustments, known as a Modified Curriculum [25], to meet the unique needs of students. These adaptations can include changes in content, instruction, learning materials, and assessments to ensure the curriculum is suitable for learners with special needs.

"So the challenges I've faced in teaching SPED courses or students with special needs. So as an English teacher it is not easy to modify and fit in the lessons and I cannot give this one a regular setup where my students can easily understand so my students have difficulty in understanding so I need to modify all the lessons compared to the regular classes." Teacher B stated.

The modification process, according to Teacher B, goes beyond simply altering the content. It involves adjusting every aspect of the lesson, from instructional methods and learning materials to assessments.

“I need to modify the topic not the same to the students which they understand and apply it, so it’s very challenging because all of my students don’t really understand the regular subject matter or area in which I can give more importance on how English is very important to our daily life. As a teacher, the modifications, the way I teach and the way I give some activities or exams to my students.” Teacher B emphasized.

1.2 Struggles Due to Students’ Poor Retention

Another challenge that both Teacher A and Teacher B encountered was the constant forgetfulness of their students regarding the lessons. Both Teacher A and Teacher B, with a hint of humor, expressed their frustration with how their students often forget the lessons or have difficulty retaining the information. Teacher A mentioned that her students with hearing impairment sometimes struggle to remember what they’ve learned, even after repeated lessons and drills that she uses to reinforce the material.

“...they get it because they have the tendency to forget the lessons that were taught in the previous meetings. I’d be like, ‘I already asked you to construct it like this, I organized this part already, at this part you will start here, this is how you do it...’ and then later I’d feel accomplished since they were able to apply the lessons very well, I’d be like, ‘Yes! At last! They now know how to do it!’ and then the next day ‘Forget me. (a student expressed in sign language)’ so I have no choice but to repeat the lessons.” Teacher A shared.

Teacher B experienced the same frustration with Teacher A as she felt that no matter how many times she repeated or simplified the content, her students with intellectual disabilities would forget the key concepts when the lessons were over. But at the same time, she understood that some of her students, who may be teenagers in age, have the cognitive capacity of a 6-year-old. This awareness helped her remain patient and empathetic, even when faced with the challenges of their limited retention. While maybe it is emotionally taxing for her to repeat the same concept over and over again, she found solace in knowing that every bit of progress her students made was a big step forward.

“I’m really glad you asked that question. One of the challenges I face is the forgetfulness of my students. Especially since I handle students that have intellectual disabilities, it’s really hard for me when most of the time they tend to forget what they have learned. So, I have no choice but to repeat every lesson till the information is retained...” Teacher B stated.

Theme 2: Inclusive Teaching Strategies

2.1 Adapting Lessons for Accessibility

Adapting lessons for students with disabilities is essential for fostering an inclusive learning environment. Teachers are tasked with finding ways to ensure all students, regardless of their abilities, can engage with the curriculum. In this case, Teacher A focuses on simplifying content and instructions to cater the needs of students with disabilities.

“...simplify the idea during discussion,” Teacher A stated.

The goal is to ensure that learners with disabilities can easily understand the material and catch up with the lesson more effectively. This approach supports student participation by reducing complexity and making the content more straightforward. English learners with impairments perform noticeably better when instructions are made clearer or simpler, emphasizing the importance of modifying teaching strategies to meet the needs of these students [26]. Similarly, Teacher B utilizes the Modified Development Individualized Education Program (MDIEP).

“I am using MDIEP so this MDIEP in regular classes, that is the lesson plan. So MDIEP is a modified program where individual needs of the students cater and they may be able to participate and understand their lessons very well...” Teacher B mentioned.

This approach involves personalizing the curriculum to address the specific learning needs and capacities of each student. Teacher B noted that this often requires additional preparation, such as designing unique activities or assessments tailored to individual abilities. One of the coping strategies identified is meticulous lesson planning through the creation of syllabi [27]. This means teachers carefully plan their lessons to make sure they are organized and match the needs of their students. By creating detailed syllabi, teachers can make their lessons more accessible and easier to follow, helping students with different abilities to learn more effectively.

Both teachers emphasize modifying lessons to support learners with disabilities, with Teacher A simplifying the content for easier comprehension, and Teacher B using MDIEP to provide individualized support. Despite their different methods, both teachers demonstrate a shared commitment to adapting lesson plans for SPED students. Their efforts are aligned in creating a more inclusive learning environment tailored to the needs of students with disabilities.

2.2 Utilization of Visual Aids

The two teachers highlight the importance of using visual aids to help SPED students better understand the lesson. Teacher A mentions meta cards, pictures, and videos as helpful tools, while acknowledging that more resources could benefit the students. She notes that, while there are many potential resources that could aid in learning, the system's current limitations restrict their availability.

“... First, it's the meta cards, pictures, and videos that can be utilized. So far, those are the ones allowed for us. Although there are many other things that could really help them, for now, within DepEd and what our educational system can afford, it's just those. Teacher A said.

Despite these limitations, Teacher A recognizes the potential of visual aids like meta cards and videos to facilitate learning, helping students with hearing impairments grasp complex ideas more easily. Her approach reflects the understanding that, although the resources may be limited, they still offer significant support in making lessons more accessible. Teacher B on the other hand, also emphasizes using pictures, videos, and real-life situations to make the lesson more concrete and accessible.

“I will use some strategies like showing some pictures, videos or even a real situation for them to understand the lesson.”
Teacher B noted.

Both teachers believe that visual aids not only support comprehension but also make abstract concepts more tangible, which is crucial for learners with disabilities who may struggle with verbal or written instructions alone. One strategy to enhance lesson preparation and increase students' opportunities to learn is to use visual aids in the classroom [28]. Visual aids help simplify complex ideas and create a more engaging learning experience by making abstract concepts easier to understand. Another research also stated that visual pictures are more effectively stored in our memory than spoken ones, highlighting the importance of using visuals to reinforce learning and improve retention [29]. By integrating visual stimuli, both teachers ensure that their students can access the material in a more diverse and comprehensive way, enhancing engagement and facilitating better learning outcomes.

2.3 Relating Lessons to Real-Life Situations

Both responses highlight the importance of using real-life situations to help SPED students understand concepts. Teacher A emphasizes the need for concrete demonstrations and the use of actual objects to clarify abstract ideas. She shares her belief that simply explaining a concept verbally is insufficient for students who require visual reinforcement. Her approach involves demonstrating the lesson with physical objects to make the learning experience more grounded in reality.

“You cannot just say it to them, you really need to show a picture, if possible (inaudible)... you should do something like a demonstration, ahh, a picture, something really actual. Teacher A mentioned.

This strategy acknowledges the fact that students with intellectual disabilities may have difficulty understanding abstract concepts without the aid of real-world examples. Teacher A's emphasis on physical demonstration and visual aids ensures that students can connect what they are learning to the world around them, making the content more relevant and relatable. Similarly, Teacher B incorporates real-life examples into her lessons, such as using a ball to illustrate its practical applications in everyday life. By connecting the lesson to something familiar, she allows students to analyze its relevance, which promotes a deeper understanding of the content.

"I will let them see a ball in that picture, I will let them analyze or realize what are the uses of a ball, how the ball is very important to us, how the ball relates to our life." Teacher B states.

Both teachers understand that relating lessons to real-life situations helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice, allowing students to see the relevance of their learning. Whether through physical objects or concrete examples, these strategies create an environment where learning is not only understood but also experienced, which is essential for SPED students to grasp key concepts and apply them in their own lives.

Theme 3: The Role of Support Mechanisms

3.1 Collaboration with Co-teachers

In education, no teacher is an island. Collaboration among teachers is the key to provide quality education and enhance teachers' skills. In SPED classrooms where every student has unique needs, the collective expertise of teachers becomes even more vital. Collaboration allows teachers to learn from colleagues with greater expertise, observe one another, exchange feedback, and reflect on their own practice [30]. They can observe each other and debrief each other as they look for ways to improve their craft. Those taking part in the collaborative process can also self-reflect on who they are as teachers and learners. This collective effort becomes a cornerstone of success in addressing the unique challenges of SPED teaching.

Teacher A and B highlighted that collaboration with other teachers enhances their ability to address the unique needs of their students. Teacher A emphasizes how collaboration guided her to adapt her teaching strategies, shifting her focus to foundational language skills like spelling and basic word construction to support hearing-impaired students. Teacher A said that collaboration with her colleagues plays a vital role because through the help with other teachers, she is properly guided on what strategies she will use that will fit with her students' needs. At first, Teacher A relied solely on the content provided by the Division and the Department of Education, not until she discovered that hearing-impaired (HI) students faced challenges in constructing sentences properly. With guidance from her colleagues, Teacher A made an adjustment. She returned to basics, focusing on spelling and foundational words to build language skills. Through collaboration with other teachers, she effectively addresses students' unique needs. Similarly, Teacher B believes that collaboration or sharing of ideas with other teachers is very important, especially those who are skilled and have been in the field of teaching SPED for a long time. Through collaboration, she was able to improve her own strategies through adapting and learning more possible effective strategies which she can use to apply in teaching her students with special needs.

"Because of them, I was able to get an idea and be properly guided. When they arrived here, they barely knew the language. Instead of teaching them sentences, I had to start with spelling. You really have to begin with the family—mama, papa—and go back to the basics. So, without them, I wouldn't have been properly guided, and it would have taken me years to cope with finding what really fits my students. Collaboration with teachers plays a vital role in your success," Teacher A said.

"I can adapt and learn the possible strategies that need to be developed and apply them in my daily teaching of students with special needs. So, collaboration is very important—sharing of expertise," Teacher B added.

Together, their experiences illustrate how collaboration empowers teachers, most especially those who are out-of-field in order

for them to share their expertise, refine their teaching methods, and build on each other's strengths. This support not only improves classroom instructions but also ensures that every student receives the tailored education they need to succeed.

3.2 Professional Development Opportunities or Training Programs

Teacher training is the backbone of effective education, equipped with the tools they need to meet the ever-changing demands of their classrooms. DepEd continuously develops 21st century teachers through various training and seminars that will hone their knowledge, expertise, and skills in the teaching-learning process. Its primary goal is to improve the craft of every teacher in school by applying what they have learned to become efficient and effective in the classroom instructions [31].

Teacher A and Teacher B have both participated in different training programs and seminars. Teacher A noted that the school provides several professional development opportunities, including regional trainings and INSET (In-Service Training), which offers more focused sessions at the division level.

Teacher B likewise attended HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) seminars, which helped her explore strategies and activities for learners. Although useful in regular classrooms, she recognized the need to adjust these methods for SPED students. She also joined training on ISLM (Interactive Self-Learning Modules), designed for online learning, but stressed that these require modifications in visuals, instructions, and tasks to meet the needs of SPED learners. In addition, Teacher B attended INSET and even facilitated a session, sharing her expertise on developing effective ISLMs with her colleagues.

"Now, during our INSET (In-Service Training), we have our own separate training at the division level, so we no longer join the regular class," Teacher A emphasized.

"Last January, I attended a seminar on HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills), where SPED teachers can identify the kinds of strategies and activities that fit the needs of the learners. HOTS is a very helpful seminar, but now that I'm assigned to the SPED area, I need to modify HOTS because my students do not fall under Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)," Teacher B affirmed.

Teacher training programs really provide support for these out-of-field teachers to learn with essential skills to better meet the needs of their students. It also fosters continuous professional growth and ensures that these out-of-field teachers, most especially those who are handling SPED, are equipped with the latest strategies and resources. They can also develop how to adapt to diverse learning environments and enhance their ability to support students' success.

Theme 4: Affect on Motivation to Teach

Teacher A is motivated to teach SPED because of her personal experience when she was once teaching in a private school where she encountered a Grade 1 student who has an unusual behavior, such as drawing propellers all day instead of engaging in class. As Teacher A recognizes his behavior, she immediately worked with the parents leading them to discover that the child needs special treatment. Years later, the child successfully rejoined mainstream education and graduated as a regular student. Teacher A's experience really inspired her to pursue a Master's in Special Education and strengthened her belief in the power of early intervention.

"The parents expressed their gratitude because if not for the early detection, they would not have been able to provide for and address the child's needs. So because of that, I was inspired and motivated up to this moment because I know that this is my calling." Teacher A mentioned.

Meanwhile, Teacher B also explained that her motivation to teach is affected due to the big adjustments and challenges she encountered in teaching students with special needs. Teacher B adjusted her teaching methods and she always finds resources to meet the unique needs of her students. Teacher B's dedication to teach students with special needs reflects her resilience and commitment. She makes sure that she provides quality education for all students, regardless of their abilities. Despite many

significant adjustments, her commitment to her role as an educator remains unwavering. Teacher B is motivated to teach SPED not only because of her professional commitment to herself but also the joy and fulfillment she finds in making a difference in her students' lives.

"I'm still motivated and committed to teach in this challenging role because as an educator, we need to accept it even if it's very challenging for us to adapt." Teacher B noted.

"I'm so happy and I enjoyed doing my job as part of my commitment as an educator. As I received my PRC license, I commit that I will do my best to educate or to give some learnings to my students even though they're regular or not" Teacher B added.

These out-of-field teachers emphasized that despite the challenges of out-of-field teaching, they believe that it also provides opportunities for growth and purpose. Through their determination and passion, these OOF teachers demonstrate that teaching is more than a profession—it is a calling to inspire, guide, and empower all learners, regardless of their abilities.

4.1 Faith as a Foundation in Teaching

Teacher A and B shared the importance of embracing challenges and trusting in a higher purpose as integral aspects of being an effective teacher. Both emphasized the need for teachers to accept challenges with gratitude, recognizing that each obstacle has a purpose and is part of God's plan. They encourage future teachers to develop perseverance and a deep love for their students, understanding that their work is divinely guided and significant. Their messages reinforce the idea that embracing difficulties and having faith in one's calling can lead to personal growth and a positive impact on students. With this, both educators stress the value of perseverance, faith, and the understanding that challenges and successes alike are part of a divine plan, shaping teachers into the individuals they are meant to be.

"Aahh to all of you, my advice is this: number one, always believe that once God has allowed you to graduate, He has a purpose for you. So, go ahead and pursue your chosen profession. Whenever you encounter those daily routines that seem repetitive, always remember to go back to God because He is the one who called you. He is the source of everything, the initiator and the fulfiller of your faith. Whatever you've asked for, He will see it through to the end. It's all because of Him. So, when you reach your profession, always return to Him and say, "You have called me for this, tell me what my purpose is." Teacher A pointed out.

"As a teacher, you need to accept the challenge. We don't have the luxury of choosing. Many people strive for these positions but don't get them. So, we need to be thankful enough. God placed us here because He has a purpose. God has a perfect plan for you, and that's why these things happen to you. Embrace the challenges and develop the perseverance to love them." Teacher B accentuated.

4.2 Adapting with Heart: Making a Difference in Every Learner's Life

Teacher A and B reflected a strong sense of commitment, adaptability, resilience, and perseverance to adapting their teaching to make a meaningful impact on every student. Teacher A and B emphasized the importance of accepting that every student group is different and understanding that the impact made on each set of learners will vary. They suggest that, despite these differences, the focus should be on continuing to engage with students and striving to make a positive difference in their learning experiences, regardless of the challenges faced. Together, both educators express a shared dedication to continuous improvement and the importance of adaptability in creating an impactful learning experience.

"How do I become effective not just in delivering the lesson but in making an impact on this set of students because every year student is different, and each group of students is unique. You will be making an impact on them in different ways. That's probably why you should just keep going." Teacher A stated.

"I need to accept the challenges that teach me how to be more empathetic with the special learners. That affects their learning environment, more engaging and eager to learn more about English using different strategies, motivations that fit in their needs." Teacher B shared.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the dedication and resilience of out-of-field English teachers in SPED, showing how they adapt and find ways to meet their students' unique needs despite limited knowledge of the learning environment. It emphasizes the importance of providing these teachers the necessary support, including training programs, collaboration with experienced SPED teachers, and access to teaching resources. Schools play a key role in creating an environment where teachers feel supported and prepared to handle challenges. The findings suggest that by addressing the needs of out-of-field teachers in SPED, schools can improve the quality of education for students with special needs. Collaboration and professional development are crucial in helping teachers gain confidence and skills. This research shows that with the right and endless support, out-of-field English teachers in SPED can still make a positive impact on their students' learning and lives. It also provides valuable insights for improving teacher preparation and creating inclusive classrooms. By investing in these teachers, schools can ensure better outcomes for both educators and students.

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