



## THE PAINS AND GAINS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN THE CITY OF KORONADAL

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20006753>

### ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of Special Needs Education (SNEd) teachers in the City of Koronadal, focusing on their pains and gains in managing learners with special needs. Utilizing Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological research design, the study involved selected SNEd teachers as participants through purposive sampling. Data were gathered using in-depth interviews and were analyzed through thematic analysis, including processes of horizontalization, clustering of meanings, and synthesis of textural and structural descriptions. Findings revealed that stress among SNEd teachers is a constant and multifaceted condition influenced by unpredictable student behavior, excessive workload, individualized education program (IEP) preparation demands, limited parental cooperation, and interpersonal challenges within the school environment. Despite experiencing physical and emotional exhaustion, teachers remain committed to their profession due to intrinsic motivation and the fulfillment gained from students' progress. The study concludes that stress is an inherent part of SNEd teaching but coexists with resilience, dedication, and professional growth. Teachers employ coping mechanisms such as emotional regulation, compartmentalization, support systems, self-care practices, and engagement in professional development. While prolonged stress may affect career decisions and leadership aspirations, adequate institutional and social support enhances motivation and sustainability in the profession. The study recommends strengthening teacher wellness programs, improving parent engagement, reviewing workload distribution, enhancing collegial support, and expanding professional development opportunities.

**Keywords:** *Special Needs Education, teacher stress, lived experiences, resilience, professional growth*

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching is widely regarded as a noble and fulfilling profession; however, for Special Needs Education (SNEd) teachers, the reality is often more complex and demanding. These educators are tasked with nurturing and supporting learners with diverse and exceptional needs while simultaneously managing individualized education programs (IEPs), behavioral challenges, administrative responsibilities, and varying learning disabilities. While their role is vital in promoting inclusive education, their lived experiences of stress and emotional strain are often underrecognized. This study explores the lived experiences of SNEd teachers, focusing on how stress is experienced, managed, and understood in their professional practice.

Globally, teaching is identified as one of the most stressful professions, with educators frequently experiencing emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and work-related fatigue (Herman et al., 2018). SNEd teachers face even greater challenges due to the specialized nature of their work, including individualized instruction, behavioral management, and emotional advocacy for learners with disabilities (Garwood, 2023). These realities are aligned with the goals of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations, 2015). International initiatives such as Education for All (EFA) and policies like the No Child Left Behind Act highlight the importance of supporting teachers to achieve inclusive education (UNESCO, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). However, despite these global commitments, high attrition rates among special education teachers continue to be reported, largely due to stress and burnout (Stevens-Hicks, 2023), indicating the urgent need for sustained teacher support.

In the Philippine context, SNEd teachers encounter additional systemic challenges that intensify stress, including limited instructional resources, high student-to-teacher ratios, insufficient institutional support, and societal misconceptions regarding disability (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Although inclusive education policies exist, there remains a gap between policy implementation and actual classroom conditions, often leaving teachers overburdened and under-supported. This disconnect directly affects the quality of instruction and threatens the achievement of inclusive education goals under SDG 4 (Saini et al., 2023).

Despite the growing body of literature on teacher stress, most studies remain quantitative in nature, focusing on burnout levels, workload, and retention rates. These approaches often fail to capture the deeper lived experiences of SNEd teachers, particularly how they interpret stress and sustain their professional commitment. Additionally, limited research explores the coping mechanisms and resilience strategies that teachers employ in managing daily classroom demands. There is also a scarcity of localized qualitative studies in the Philippine context that examine how institutional

conditions, parental involvement, and school support systems influence teacher stress and motivation.

Addressing these gaps is essential, as teacher well-being plays a critical role in instructional effectiveness, classroom stability, and learner development. Without a deeper understanding of SNEd teachers' lived experiences, interventions may fail to respond to their actual needs. Therefore, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of SNEd teachers in the City of Koronadal, focusing on their stressors, coping strategies, and professional growth. By giving voice to their experiences, the study aimed to contribute to a more responsive and supportive educational environment that strengthens teacher resilience and sustains inclusive education aligned with SDG 4.

## Research Questions

This study explored the lived experiences of stress among Special Needs Education (SNEd) teachers, focusing on how they encounter, interpret, and manage stress in their professional environment. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, it examined the factors contributing to stress, coping strategies, and its impact on professional growth and career decisions.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Special Education Teachers?
2. What factors contribute to stress in Special Education Teachers?
3. How do special education teachers cope with stress?
4. How does stress impact the professional growth and career decisions of special education teachers?

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach to explore and understand the lived experiences of stress among Special Needs Education (SNEd) teachers in the City of Koronadal. This research design focuses on interpreting how individuals construct meaning from their personal experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of their perspectives in the context of special education teaching. The participants of the study consisted of ten (10) SNEd teachers from selected schools in the City of Koronadal, who were selected through purposive sampling. To qualify for inclusion, participants had to be currently teaching in the SNEd program, have at least three (3) years of teaching experience, and be willing to share their lived experiences through in-depth interviews. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by a validated researcher-made interview guide consisting of four (4) open-ended questions aligned with the research problems. The interviews were conducted in a private and quiet setting to ensure confidentiality and to encourage participants to openly share their experiences.

For data analysis, the study utilized Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological method, which involved bracketing (epoche) to set aside researcher bias, horizontalization to identify significant statements, clustering of meaning units into themes, the development of textural and structural descriptions, and the synthesis of meanings to capture the essence of the participants' lived experiences. The scope of the study was limited to SNEd teachers in selected schools in the City of Koronadal, focusing on their stress experiences, coping strategies, contributing factors, and professional implications. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and the use of pseudonyms to protect participants' identities.

## **RESULTS**

The findings of the study revealed several themes describing the lived experience of stress among Special Needs Education (SNEd) teachers in the City of Koronadal. For the lived experiences of stress, five themes emerged: unpredictability and demanding workdays, stress from student behavioral challenges, emotional regulation and coping strategies, rewarding moments and professional fulfillment, and physical and emotional exhaustion. In terms of factors contributing to stress, five themes were identified: parent-related stressors, excessive workload and multiple responsibilities, challenges in IEP preparation and documentation, lack of understanding and support from colleagues, and student behavioral unpredictability. For coping mechanisms, four themes surfaced: personal coping strategies, support systems, habitual and routine-based coping, and professional learning as coping. Lastly, in relation to the impact of stress on professional growth and career decisions, three themes were identified: contemplating exit and reconsidering commitment, influence of stress on motivation and professional goals, and effect of stress on opportunities and support needed.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Lived Experience of Stress Among SNED Teachers**

The findings revealed that the lived experience of stress among SNED teachers is characterized by continuous adaptation, emotional regulation, and persistent professional demands as they navigate highly complex classroom environments. Teachers described their daily work as unpredictable, requiring immediate adjustment to shifting student behaviors, emotional needs, and instructional disruptions. This finding aligns with Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015), who emphasized that teachers frequently experience stress due to workload demands and unpredictable classroom situations. In SNED contexts, this unpredictability is intensified due to the diverse cognitive, emotional, and behavioral needs of learners, requiring constant flexibility and responsiveness.

Similarly, participants highlighted that stress is deeply linked to student behavioral challenges, including tantrums, meltdowns, and safety risks. This supports Garwood,

(2023), who found that managing challenging behaviors significantly increases stress among special education teachers. The present study further expands this understanding by showing that SNED teachers operate in a dual role as educators and protectors, where instruction and safety management occur simultaneously.

Moreover, the findings revealed that emotional regulation is a necessary professional discipline among SNEd teachers. Teachers consistently compartmentalize personal stress and regulate emotional responses to maintain classroom stability. This supports Aldrup et al (2024), who emphasized that teacher emotional competence is essential for maintaining a positive learning environment. From the lens of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), this reflects emotion-focused coping through cognitive appraisal and self-regulation.

Despite these challenges, the findings also revealed that SNEd teachers experience professional fulfillment through witnessing student progress. These small yet meaningful achievements serve as motivational anchors that sustain commitment. This aligns with Steven-Hicks (2023), who noted that special education teachers remain in the profession due to meaningful student relationships and perceived impact. Additionally, the presence of physical and emotional exhaustion reflects Maslach and Leiter's (2016) theory of burnout, which identifies chronic stress as a contributor to emotional depletion and reduced performance.

Overall, the lived experience of SNEd teachers demonstrates that stress is not a singular event but a continuous condition shaped by unpredictability, emotional labor, and professional responsibility, balanced by moments of fulfillment that sustain motivation.

### **Factors Contributing to Stress Among SNED Teachers**

The findings revealed that stress among SNEd teachers is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including relational, institutional, and instructional demands. Parent-related stressors emerged as a major source of pressure, particularly due to non-participation, poor cooperation, and unrealistic expectations. This supports Gaspar (2025), which emphasized that effective collaboration between teachers and families is essential for student progress. When collaboration is weak, teachers experience increased emotional and instructional burden.

Excessive workload and multiple responsibilities also significantly contribute to stress. Teachers reported overlapping roles, simultaneous deadlines, and administrative tasks in addition to teaching duties. This aligns with Saini et al (2023), who explained that excessive job demands lead to emotional exhaustion. In special education contexts, Steven-Hicks (2023) noted that workload complexity is intensified due to documentation, coordination, and instructional demands.

Furthermore, challenges in IEP preparation and documentation were identified as a major cognitive stressor. Teachers described uncertainty in developing appropriate individualized goals, reflecting Steven-Hicks (2023), who emphasized that IEP-related

tasks are among the most demanding responsibilities in special education. From Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this represents continuous depletion of cognitive and emotional resources.

Lack of understanding and support from colleagues also contributed to stress, as misconceptions about SNEd teaching led to professional isolation. This supports Darwish et al (2025), who highlighted that inclusive education requires strong collegial collaboration. Additionally, student behavioral unpredictability further intensified stress, consistent with Shernoff et al. (2017), who identified classroom instability as a key stressor in teaching environments.

Overall, the factors contributing to stress among SNEd teachers are multidimensional and interconnected, demonstrating that stress is not isolated but embedded within relational, institutional, and instructional systems.

### **Coping Mechanisms and Strategies of SNEd Teachers**

The findings indicate that SNEd teachers adopt a range of coping mechanisms that operate at personal, relational, and professional levels. Personal coping strategies such as breathing, pausing, and emotional regulation were commonly used to manage immediate stress. This aligns with Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who identified emotion-focused coping as a key response to uncontrollable stressors. Aldrup et al (2024) further emphasized that emotional regulation supports classroom stability and teacher resilience.

Support systems also played a critical role in coping. Teachers relied on colleagues for guidance and family members for emotional release. This supports Vangrieken et al. (2015), who highlighted that collegial collaboration reduces teacher isolation and stress. From Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources Theory, social support functions as a resource that replenishes emotional capacity.

Habitual and routine-based coping strategies such as prayer, planning, rest, and hobbies were also evident. These routines provided structure and emotional stability, consistent with Kriakous et al. (2021), who found that mindfulness and self-care practices reduce stress. Additionally, Ellerbee (2021) emphasized that psychological detachment from work is essential for recovery.

Finally, professional learning emerged as a coping strategy, where teachers attended seminars and stress management workshops. This aligns with Greenberg et al. (2016), who found that professional development improves teacher well-being and coping capacity. Overall, coping among SNEd teachers reflects a multidimensional process involving self-regulation, social support, routine-building, and professional growth.

### **Impact of Stress on Professional Growth and Career Decisions**

The findings revealed that stress significantly influences the professional growth and career decisions of SNEd teachers. Some participants reported contemplating

leaving the profession due to overwhelming demands, consistent with Encabo & Ambalong (2025), who identified stress as a major factor in teacher attrition. However, this contemplation does not always lead to resignation, as intrinsic motivation and professional commitment often sustain teachers.

Stress also functions as a catalyst for motivation and professional growth. Teachers described reframing stress as a challenge that strengthens their determination and goal-setting. This supports Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who explained that stress appraisal determines whether individuals respond with avoidance or adaptive action. From Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), self-efficacy plays a central role in whether stress leads to withdrawal or persistence.

Additionally, stress influences readiness for professional opportunities and leadership roles. When resources are depleted, teachers hesitate to take on additional responsibilities. However, institutional support enhances confidence and professional growth. This aligns with Greenberg et al. (2016), who emphasized that supportive environments improve teacher engagement and resilience.

Overall, the impact of stress on professional growth is complex and dynamic. It may lead to reflection, withdrawal, motivation, or advancement depending on individual coping capacity and institutional support systems.

### **Overall Synthesis of Findings**

Overall, the findings of the study demonstrate that stress among SNED teachers is a multifaceted experience shaped by classroom unpredictability, behavioral demands, relational challenges, institutional workload, and documentation requirements. However, stress is not solely experienced as negative; it is balanced by coping strategies, professional fulfillment, and institutional support systems. Teachers navigate stress through emotional regulation, social support, habitual routines, and professional development. Ultimately, stress influences not only daily functioning but also long-term professional identity, motivation, and career decision-making, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of SNEd teaching as both challenging and meaningful.

### **Conclusions**

This study specifically addressed the lived experiences of stress among Special Needs Education (SNEd) teachers, the factors contributing to stress, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the impact of stress on their professional growth and career decisions.

The findings conclude that SNEd teachers experience stress as a continuous and multidimensional condition characterized by classroom unpredictability, behavioral challenges, emotional regulation demands, professional fulfillment, and physical and emotional exhaustion. Their lived experience reflects a constant need for adaptation,

where instruction, behavioral management, and emotional control occur simultaneously, yet moments of student progress provide meaning and sustain their commitment.

The study further concludes that stress among SNEd teachers is primarily driven by interconnected factors such as parent-related stressors, excessive workload and overlapping responsibilities, difficulties in IEP preparation and documentation, lack of understanding and support from colleagues, and persistent student behavioral unpredictability. These factors demonstrate that teacher stress is not isolated but is rooted in relational, institutional, and instructional systems that collectively intensify professional demands.

It is also concluded that SNEd teachers cope with stress through a combination of personal, social, habitual, and professional strategies. These include emotional self-regulation techniques, engagement in leisure and restorative activities, reliance on peer and family support systems, development of daily routines and self-care practices, and participation in professional learning and stress management training. These coping mechanisms highlight teachers' active efforts to sustain emotional balance, professional effectiveness, and personal well-being despite ongoing challenges.

Lastly, the findings conclude that stress has a significant influence on the professional growth and career decisions of SNEd teachers. While some teachers experience stress-induced thoughts of leaving the profession, many continue due to intrinsic motivation, passion, and commitment to learners. Stress also serves as both a limiting and motivating factor, affecting confidence in taking on new responsibilities while simultaneously encouraging reflection, resilience, and goal-setting. The presence of institutional and social support plays a crucial role in determining whether stress hinders or promotes professional growth.

Overall, the study concludes that stress among SNEd teachers is a complex and dynamic experience that simultaneously challenges and strengthens their professional identity. While it may lead to exhaustion and reconsideration of career paths, it also fosters resilience, adaptability, and deeper commitment to special needs education when supported by effective coping strategies and strong institutional support systems.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are respectfully proposed:

**On Classroom Demands and Emotional Strain.** School administrators may consider strengthening teacher wellness initiatives to support the emotional and mental well-being of Special Needs Education (SNEd) teachers. Provision of stress management programs, counseling services, peer debriefing sessions, and structured behavioral support systems may help reduce sustained emotional strain in highly demanding classroom environments.

**On Parent-Related and Documentation Stress.** Schools may enhance parent engagement programs to strengthen collaboration in the development and implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Clear communication strategies, regular consultations, and orientation on SNEd processes may help align parental expectations with learners' developmental needs and reduce relational stress experienced by teachers.

**On Collegial Support and Professional Environment.** School institutions may promote stronger collaboration and understanding among general education and SNEd teachers through inclusive school culture programs, professional dialogues, and team-based planning. Strengthening collegial support may help reduce misconceptions about SNEd teaching and lessen professional isolation among teachers.

**On Professional Growth and Career Sustainability.** School administrators and education leaders may review workload distribution, administrative assignments, and documentation requirements to prevent role overload and overlapping responsibilities. Ensuring a balanced workload may support teacher well-being and sustain long-term commitment to the profession. In addition, recognition programs and institutional appreciation may further strengthen motivation and professional identity.

**Future Research.** Future studies may explore the stress experiences of SNEd teachers in other geographical contexts or school settings to broaden the understanding of their lived experiences. Further research may also examine long-term coping mechanisms, resilience development, and the effectiveness of institutional support programs in reducing teacher stress.

## **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

The researchers affirm that this study strictly followed ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were fully informed of their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study, and all data were handled in accordance with Data Privacy principles to protect respondents' identities and responses. The well-being of the participants was prioritized, ensuring that no harm or undue stress was caused during data gathering.

The study was conducted with no conflict of interest, and all findings were interpreted objectively and without bias. Proper academic integrity was observed, and plagiarism was strictly avoided. The results were used solely for academic and research purposes.

## **Acknowledgments**

The author expresses sincere gratitude to all individuals who contributed to the completion of this study. Deep appreciation is extended to the SNEd teachers who

generously shared their time, experiences, and insights, which made this research possible. Their openness and participation are greatly valued.

The author also acknowledges the guidance and support of the thesis adviser and panel members for their constructive feedback, expertise, and encouragement throughout the research process. Appreciation is likewise given to the authors of the instruments and related literature that served as important references for this study.

Finally, heartfelt thanks are extended to family, friends, and all those who provided moral support and motivation during the conduct of this research.

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**APA Citation:**

Morales, Q. L., & Maglantay, A. A. (2026). THE PAINS AND GAINS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN THE CITY OF KORONADAL. *Ignatian International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 4(5), 344–354. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20006753>

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