



LIFE INSIDE A SPINNING WHEEL: PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS HANDLING LEARNERS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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ABSTRACT

The poor performance of roles in handling learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder is alarming. Through the lens of Role Theory, the researcher explored the SPED teachers' behaviors, rights, and duties that shape teachers' roles in handling ASD learners. Qualitative descriptive study design, purposive sampling, and thematic analysis are the methods the researcher used. Based on the interviews of the ten study participants, the researcher found that resilience, patience, structured practice, and compassion are core behaviors of SPED teachers; rights such as support aides, training, resources, and recognition; and duties including care-giving, advocacy, mediator, and family guidance, all rooted in educational policy. Policies to ensure better teaching role performance may be amended. Future research may utilize multiple linear progression, exploratory factor analysis, and mediation analysis to validate how SPED teachers' behaviors, rights, and duties interact as dynamic components shaped by educational policy.

Keywords: *Life inside a spinning wheel, perceptions of special education teachers, handling learners with autism spectrum disorder, qualitative descriptive design*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the poor performance of teaching roles among Special Education (SPED) teachers handling learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has become a persistent issue in inclusive education. Despite international commitments to equity, many teachers struggle to enact their roles effectively, resulting in inconsistent instructional delivery and limited learner progress (Listiakova, 2023). In light of this global concern, the researcher needs to critically examine how teachers' roles are being performed in diverse educational contexts.

In various countries, the problem has been observed in different forms. In the United States, studies highlighted that SPED teachers often underperform in individualized instruction for ASD learners, reflecting gaps in role enactment (Taresh, 2023). In the United Kingdom, poor performance is linked to limited confidence and preparedness among teachers in fulfilling their roles (Lisak Šegota & Listiakova, 2023). Similarly, in Australia, weak role clarity and inconsistent practices have been observed, undermining inclusive education goals (Manalastas, 2023). These examples illustrate that the researcher sees the issue of poor role performance is not confined to one nation but is a shared challenge across educational systems.

In the Philippine context, the researcher has observed that the poor performance of SPED teachers in handling learners with ASD remains a pressing concern, particularly in public schools where role expectations are inadequately defined. Recent studies revealed that teachers often struggle to fulfill their roles effectively, reflecting systemic gaps in support and recognition (Delos Reyes, 2023; Cagape, 2023). This situation highlights the urgent need to strengthen role clarity and performance standards within the country's special education system.

The consequence of poor performance in teaching roles is significant, as it leads to diminished learner progress, inequitable educational opportunities, and weakened teacher resilience. Such outcomes hinder the sustainability of inclusive education practices and compromise the long-term effectiveness of special education programs (Arnado, 2023; Hungo, 2023). Addressing this problem is therefore critical to ensuring that learners with ASD receive equitable, high-quality education and that teachers are empowered to perform their roles effectively.

Significance of the Study

The researcher believes this study supports Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by emphasizing the need for schools to genuinely include learners with diverse needs, particularly students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, who benefit greatly from clear and consistent routines. The researcher also sees a strong connection to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), as the findings draw attention to the stress, exhaustion, and emotional strain commonly experienced by special education teachers. By highlighting gaps in teaching support and giving voice to teachers' experiences in resource-limited settings such as Bislig City, the researcher finds that this study may offer meaningful insights that can inform policy development, guide school leadership decisions, and strengthen collaboration among the Department of Education, school administrators, and families. Overall, the researcher views this study as supporting the development of context-appropriate training, responsive policies, and collaborative systems that enhance learning outcomes while safeguarding teachers' well-being.

Research Questions

The main objective of this study was to explore the experiences of Special Education (SPED) teachers handling learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD),

particularly in relation to behaviors, teachers' rights, duties, and social status. It sought to answer the question:

1. What are the behaviors, rights, and duties of Special Education Teachers in handling learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?
2. What are the sources of their behaviors, rights, and duties?

Theoretical Lens

Linton (1936) explained that an individual enacts expected behaviors, rights, and duties according to their position.

Behaviors are the observable actions expected of individuals in a given role, shaping how they interact with others and reinforcing social norms, for instance, a teacher instructing, guiding, and maintaining discipline. Rights represent the entitlements and privileges that come with a role, such as access to resources and training, or receiving respect and recognition. Duties, on the other hand, are the obligations and responsibilities that ensure the role contributes to the stability of society, including preparing lessons, nurturing students, or upholding fairness. Together, these elements form a dynamic balance that behaviors express the role, rights empower it, and duties constrain it, ensuring that individuals fulfill their positions in ways that sustain social order and coherence.

Conceptual Paradigm

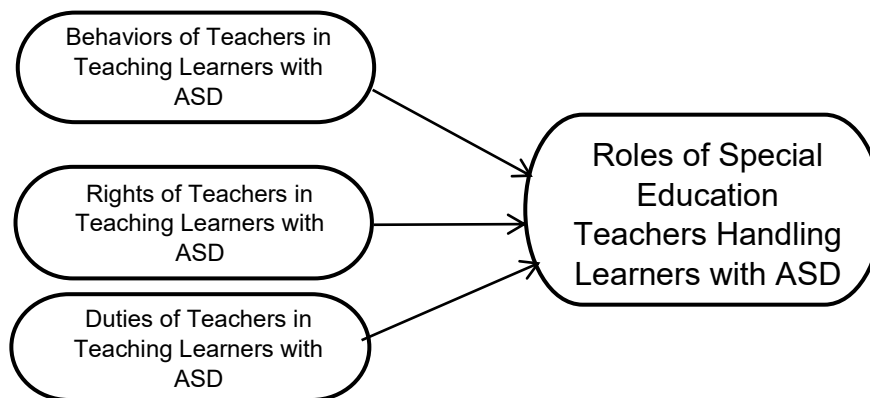


Figure 1: Role Theory of Ralph Linton

Assumptions

In this study, the researcher assumed that the statements and perspectives of the respondents align with the assertion of what is being said on the theory. Their experiences on how their professional social status as Special Education teachers working with Autism

Spectrum Disorder learners are expressed in practice reflect on the theory's components, such as behaviors, rights, and duties.

The participants' responses show that some of their perceptions align with their social status and the expected behaviors, rights, and duties of their roles in the school system. Their perceptions highlight how teachers recognize and fulfill the responsibilities associated with their position, such as guiding students, maintaining classroom order, and exercising their professional authority. At the same time, some responses do not fully align with the theory, exposing tensions and gaps between theoretical expectations and the realities of classroom practice.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researcher employed a qualitative descriptive research design in this study. The researcher considered this design appropriate because the objective was to explore teachers' perspectives in depth and understand the meanings they attach to their experiences in handling learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Castleberry & Nolen, 2020). The researcher's focus was on how teachers perceive their rights, duties, and behaviors, navigate challenges, and cope with daily demands in handling autism spectrum disorder learners.

The researcher found that the qualitative descriptive design allowed for an in-depth examination of complex professional realities that cannot be captured through quantitative measures. It provided the flexibility to clarify teachers' perspectives and highlight the motivations behind their actions through interviews and follow-up questions. By emphasizing depth and context, this design offered a comprehensive depiction of teachers' experiences, consistent with the goals of qualitative inquiry (Levitt, 2021).

Research Locale

The researcher conducted this study in various public schools in Bislig City, Surigao del Sur, where Special Education (SPED) teachers are assigned. These schools were chosen because they actively implement inclusive education in line with the Department of Education's Inclusive Education Policy Framework (DepEd Order No. 72, s. 2009). The locale provided a meaningful context for exploring teachers' experiences in managing learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

By situating the research in these schools, the researcher was able to capture authentic accounts of how teachers perceive their roles, navigate challenges, and adapt instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of learners with autism. The setting offered opportunities to examine how teachers balance daily classroom demands with the specialized support required for inclusion, thereby highlighting the realities and

complexities of special education teachers handling learners with autism spectrum disorder.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The respondents of this study consisted of a total of 10 SPED teachers employed in different districts during the school year 2025-2026. These special education teachers were included because they were handling Autism Spectrum Disorder learners at the time of the study, making their experiences directly relevant to the research focus.

The study employed a purposive sampling, a technique used to gain depth of understanding. The researcher chose this method because it ensures the inclusion of information-rich cases, allowing the researcher to capture nuanced perspectives and strengthen the findings. By selecting SPED teachers handling learners with ASD and navigating the Department of Education's policy practice gap, this study highlights authentic voices that reveal both successes and challenges. This approach aligns with the goal of synthesizing teacher narratives, systemic supports, and policy realities into a coherent account of their lived experiences.

Data Gathering Technique

This study utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the data gathering technique. It is a technique that aims to explore participants' perceptions in detail while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions. It is suited for this study because it seeks to understand the teachers' personal perspectives, practices, and challenges in real contexts (Saldaña, 2021).

With this, semi-structured interviews provided rich and meaningful data, encouraged openness through a conversational style, and enabled the researcher to probe into specific themes as they emerged (Ruslin et al., 2022). This approach was effective because SPED teachers handling learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder could share common practices and unique challenges, providing authentic insights into teaching strategies, behavior management, and support systems in Bislig City.

Data Analysis Technique

The researcher analyzed the data using thematic analysis, which is used to identify and interpret patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The researcher followed the phases of familiarization, coding, theme development, review, and reporting to systematically organize the data. This method is widely used in qualitative research to generate meaningful themes from participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Through this process, the researcher was able to identify the key themes related to resilience, coping strategies, and challenges experienced by SPED teachers in handling learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Thematic analysis allowed the

researcher to present findings in a clear and organized manner while remaining grounded in participants' actual responses (Kim et al., 2023).

RESULTS

The Behaviors of Special Education Teachers in Handling Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The behaviors in the classroom are not just professional responses; they are deeply human acts of care and strength. One participant spoke with raw vulnerability, her voice carrying the weight of exhaustion yet shimmering with quiet strength, an unfiltered song of the heart. She confessed that the relentless cycle of routine disruptions had reshaped her entire being (TFP4-P26-IQ1). She said...

Honestly, nakapahimo gyud siya nako more patient. I've learned to breathe, slow down, and not take things personally. Emotionally draining siya labi na kung sunod-sunod ang routine disruptions. Professionally, it made me more structured and observant. They made me stronger, more patient, and more compassionate. But they also made me more aware nga SPED teachers deserve proper recognition and support. (Honestly, it really made me more patient. I have learned to breathe, slow down, and not take things personally. It is emotionally draining, especially when there are continuous routine disruptions. Professionally, it made me more structured and observant. They made me stronger, more patient, and more compassionate. But they also made me more aware that SPED teachers deserve proper recognition and support.)

SPED teachers carry a dual role that is burdened by struggles yet strengthened by quiet triumphs. Disrupted routines reveal systemic neglect but also teach resilience, shaping patience, empathy, and awareness. For learners, routines are lifelines; for teachers, they are demanding yet transformative. This struggle becomes a source of growth, underscoring the urgent need for stronger systemic support.

Another participant captured this tension with striking clarity (TFP1-P3 IQ1). Her words revealed the gap between policy and practice in plain, vivid terms, turning an abstract issue into a lived reality felt by teachers every day. She shared...

Consistency in the physical environment is another strategy. My tone and demeanor have a direct effect on how they react. It 'disrupted' the lesson on the surface, but honestly, it enhanced my understanding of how deeply routines anchor them. I always have Plan A, B, and C ready. I've become more intentional I do not leave space for ambiguity because ambiguity can be a trigger.

As the researcher reflected on her testimony, the researcher realized how structure is not rigidity but scaffolding. A framework that steadies learners while allowing teachers to bend without breaking their fragile security. Their words reminded the researcher that SPED teaching lives in this paradox: routines as anchors of predictability, flexibility as acts of compassion. Effective practice weaves both into a responsive dance, sustaining learners' safety and progress while fortifying teachers' resilience and identity.

A participant added with raw honesty, her words carrying the dual weight of patience and exhaustion visible in her presence (TFP6-P37-IQ1). Her words echoed as she said...

For me, handling learners with ASD who rely heavily on routines has really shaped how I understand behavior. Dili lang siya behavior nga makita nimo sa gawas. Naa gyud siyay deeper meaning and emotional root. I realized over the years nga when their routines are followed, they feel safe. But when routines are changed, even unintentionally, mura dayon og mag-shake ilang whole world. As a teacher, it taught me to slow down. Dili ka pwede paspas-paspas lang. Every day, you need to think ahead, unsa ang possible trigger? Naa ba koy gibago sa classroom nga makasamot sa iyang anxiety? (For me, handling learners with ASD who rely heavily on routines has really shaped how I understand behavior. It is not just behavior that you can see on the outside. There is really a deeper meaning and emotional root behind it. I realized over the years that when their routines are followed, they feel safe. But when routines are changed, even unintentionally, it is as if their whole world is shaken. As a teacher, it taught me to slow down. You cannot just rush through things. Every day, you need to think ahead. What are the possible triggers? Is there anything I changed in the classroom that might increase their anxiety?)

Her reflection shows deep empathy. She sees behavior not just as outward actions but as rooted in emotion. The image of a child's "world shaking" when routines change highlights how fragile their sense of safety can be. For the researcher, her words are a reminder that teaching ASD learners means slowing down, anticipating triggers, and creating stability with patience and foresight.

The researcher felt the participant's words resonate deeply, as teaching often means carrying both patience and exhaustion at the same time. The experience can be likened to a tree in a storm, bending but not breaking while striving to shield learners from the winds of disruption. Each deep breath, each moment spent slowing down and concealing frustration, feels like swallowing thunder so that only calm skies reach them. Even when drained, the researcher recognizes that steadiness serves as an anchor for learners, and that love, though heavy at times, remains the compass that guides educators through the waves of challenge.

Moreover, one participant (TFP8-P49-IQ1) shared ...

My experience with ASD learners who rely on routines has been a mix of stability and unpredictability. Routine gives them structure, pero once naa'y disturbance, even small things like different lighting, a new student, or missing materials, their behavior changes quickly. (My experience with ASD learners who rely on routines has been a mix of stability and unpredictability. Routine gives them structure, but once there is a disturbance, even small things like different lighting, a new student, or missing materials, their behavior changes quickly. They do not react the way regular kids do.)

Another participant articulated her experience with emotional depth and sincerity (TFP7-P43-IQ1) by saying ...

My lived experience with ASD learners who depend on routines is that every day feels like a puzzle. If everything goes exactly the same as yesterday, smooth kaayo ang whole morning. But once naay missing piece. I had learners who memorize the smallest details kanang the order of greetings, the exact minutes of transitions, even the sound of the bell. Any change, bisan gamay, buto and can trigger stress. Over time, I realized routines are not just preferences, they're coping mechanisms. Mao nga I try my best to keep their environment predictable kay it helps them feel safe. (My lived experience with ASD learners who depend on routines is that every day feels like a puzzle. If everything goes exactly the same as yesterday, the whole morning goes very smoothly. But once there is a missing piece, challenges arise. I had learners who memorize the smallest details like the order of greetings, the exact minutes of transitions, even the sound of the bell. Any change, even small ones, can explode and trigger stress. Over time, I realized routines are not just preferences, they're coping mechanisms. That is why I try my best to keep their environment predictable because it helps them feel safe.)

The researcher resonates with this reflection because it shows how fragile, yet vital routines are for ASD learners. The image of each day as a puzzle captures the balance teachers must protect, one missing piece can unsettle everything. The researcher admires the patience it takes to guard those routines, turning them into safe harbors where children can feel secure despite the storms of change.

Continuing the thread of lived realities (TFP9-P55-IQ1), another participant spoke with emphasis ...

My lived experiences with ASD learners nga very routine-dependent kay mura'g pagsulod sa ilang own little world, carefully and respectfully. For them, routine is not just a schedule; routine is security. Kung naay change gamay, makita nimo dayon ang shift sa ilang behavior. (My lived experiences with ASD learners who are very routine-dependent feel like entering their own little world, carefully and respectfully. For them, routine

is not just a schedule; it is security. When even small changes occur, you can immediately see the shift in their behavior.)

His words highlight the sensitivity required in teaching ASD learners. The researcher appreciates how he sees routines not just as schedules but as sources of security. It is a reminder that even small changes can deeply affect a child's sense of stability, and teachers must approach their world with patience and respect.

For SPED teachers of learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder, each day is a test of endurance, a cycle of emotional regulation, trigger anticipation, and crisis management. Their resilience is remarkable, yet beneath dedication lies a quiet erosion of strength, balance slipping away under constant labor. Emotional demands press against the limits of body and mind, leaving teachers teetering on the edge, where fulfillment and fatigue coexist in fragile tension.

The Rights of Special Education Teachers in Handling Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Listening to these accounts of patience and resilience, the researcher began to see a deeper thread. Their behaviors are remarkable, but they should not be demanded without support. Behaviors point to rights, rights that are too often overlooked. The researcher felt a growing urgency, these teachers are not asking for luxuries, but for fairness and recognition.

Reading the participants' accounts, the researcher felt a deep frustration. How can we expect these teachers to carry such heavy loads without the basic support they need? Their voices reveal a system that too often turns a blind eye to their struggles.

A participant spoke with weary honesty, her words revealing the hollow echo of institutional neglect (TFP5-P33-Q2). She said ...

Honestly, SPED teachers need more support aides. I believe we have the right to these things, pero dili gyud siya consistent. Pero overlooked pud ko when we lacked additional staff. Murag expected nga kaya ra namo bisag kulang manpower. (Honestly, SPED teachers need more support aides. I believe we have the right to these, but it's not always consistent. At the same time, I feel overlooked when there's a lack of additional staff, as if it is expected that we can manage even with limited manpower.)

As the researcher read her words, frustration rose within her, how could teachers be expected to carry the world alone? One teacher stands at the center of a storm, shielding learners whose fragile routines collapse at the slightest disruption, yet without aides every crisis grows heavier and every act of patience more draining.

Another participant added and echoed this frustration; her words steeped in exhaustion yet quiet resilience (TFP7-P44-IQ2). She said ...

Overlooked ko when I requested for an additional aide for a student who needed one-on-one routine support. Na-decline kay supposedly 'manageable ra.' But in reality, it wasn't. The challenge is juggling everything. Behaviors, routines, parent communication, documentation. Sometimes I end the day drained, especially after meltdowns. I remind myself to breathe, drink water, and take quick mental breaks, kay kung dili, ma-overwhelm pud ko. (I felt overlooked when I requested an additional aide for a student who needed one-on-one routine support. My request was declined because it was supposedly "manageable," but in reality, it wasn't. The challenge is juggling everything like behaviors, routines, parent communication, documentation. Sometimes I end the day completely drained, especially after meltdowns. I remind myself to breathe, drink water, and take quick mental breaks, because if I do not, I get overwhelmed too.)

The researcher felt overwhelmed just imagining her day. Her voice revealed rights denied, rights to aides, training, and resources that should be foundational.

Another participant also captured this paradox with quiet frustration, her words balancing gratitude with neglect (TFP6-P39-IQ2), saying ...

My lived experience is a mix of feeling supported and sometimes forgotten. SPED teaching is specialized, pero dili tanan institutions treat it that way. There are days I feel my rights are respected like when trainings are provided or when the school acknowledges the difficulty of behavior management. Pero naa pud days nga murag kami ra'y bahala sa among kaugalingon. I believe we should have strong access to training and resources. Pero realistically, limited siya. (My lived experience is a mix of feeling supported and sometimes forgotten. SPED teaching is specialized, but not all institutions treat it that way. There are days I feel my rights are respected, like when trainings are provided or when the school acknowledges the challenges of behavior management. But there are also days when it feels like we're on our own. I believe we should have strong access to training and resources, yet in reality, it is limited.)

The researcher thought about how guidance is not a privilege but a necessity. She felt a pang of empathy, knowing that without consistent training, teachers are left improvising in the dark, resilience stretched thin.

One participant also conveyed her frustration; her words steeped in the unfairness of waiting for what should never be optional (TFP4-P28-IQ2). She shared ...

Mura'g dili makita sa school how essential these rights are for us. Our room once lacked sensory materials for months, and I was told, 'Wait for next budget' while other departments got new flatscreen TVs. It felt unfair. (It feels like the school does not fully recognize how essential these rights are for us. Our classroom went without sensory materials for months, and I was told, "Wait for the next budget," while other departments got new flatscreen TVs. It felt unfair.)

The researcher felt her frustration deeply; it is painful to see essential needs treated as optional. Waiting for months for sensory materials while other departments receive luxuries like flat screen TVs shows how unfair priorities can be. For the researcher, her words echo the injustice of a system that overlooks what truly matters for learners' rights and well-being.

Adding another layer to these narratives, one participant shared his short experience, yet thoughtful insight (TFP10-P62-IQ2). He expressed...

I feel SPED teachers should have priority training and materials, pero often kulang or delayed ang support. (I feel SPED teachers should have priority training and materials, but often the support is lacking or delayed.)

His statement underscores a clear gap that SPED teachers need priority training and materials, yet support is often lacking or delayed. This highlights the urgency of matching their dedication with timely resources so their resilience is not stretched beyond limits.

Lastly, a teacher voiced out her honest thoughts about her rights about being a Special Education teacher. She said with a hint of dismay on her face (TFP3-P20-IQ2)...

So, this one, uhm, honestly ha mixed kaayo akong experience. Like sometimes ma-feel nako supported ko by the school, but there are also many times nga mura kog left behind. Handling kids with strict routines requires more effort, more emotional labor, more preparation pero ang support nga ako dapat ma-receive, dili pirmi consistent. Sometimes mura'g expected na gamiton ra nako akong 'patience power' without matching it with actual resources or training. (Honestly, my experience has been very mixed. Sometimes I feel supported by the school, but there are also many times when I feel left behind. Handling kids with strict routines requires more effort, more emotional labor, and more preparation, yet the support I should receive is not always consistent. Sometimes it feels like I'm just expected to rely on my 'patience power' without being given the proper resources or training to match it.)

Her statement revealed the heavy emotional and practical demands of being a Special Education teacher. The researcher felt empathy for her struggle for giving so much

patience and preparation while support remains inconsistent. It is troubling that resilience is expected to replace proper resources and training. Her words highlight the urgent need for schools to provide steady, tangible support so that teachers aren't left to carry the weight alone.

Listening to the voices of SPED teachers, the researcher could not help but feel a growing sense of urgency. Their rights, often overlooked or inconsistently upheld, are not luxuries, they are necessities. These educators are not just asking for more; they are asking for what is fair and essential.

The Duties of Special Education Teachers in Handling Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder

But rights alone do not capture the full picture. As the researcher continued to listen, she became increasingly aware of the immense responsibilities these teachers shoulder. Their duties expand far beyond instruction, reshaping their identities into caregivers, advocates, and emotional anchors. This realization led her to reflect on the weight of their daily labor.

A teacher's story illustrated this vividly, her account steeped in the delicate work of guiding families (TFP8-P52-IQ3) when she said ...

Sometimes I feel like a behavior specialist, mediator between parents and therapists, emotional anchor sa bata. I once helped a parent develop a home routine. Within a week, the child's sleep improved. (Sometimes I feel like a behavior specialist, a mediator between parents and therapists, and the child's emotional anchor. I once helped a parent develop a home routine, and within a week, the child's sleep improved.)

As the researcher read her words, she felt awe. The researcher imagined her guiding a family through sleepless nights, helping a child find peace. SPED teachers are not just educators, they are lifelines for entire households.

Another participant added another dimension, likening the composure required in moments of escalation to walking a tightrope above roaring winds (TFP10-P61-IQ1). She shared...

Tiring jud sometimes because you need to stay calm even if stressful. Emotional escalation and class disruption. Lisod kay the child needs immediate support while the other students need attention too. (It is really tiring sometimes because you need to stay calm even in stressful situations. Emotional escalation and class disruptions happen, and it's difficult because the child needs immediate support while the other students also need attention.)

The researcher felt the exhaustion in her words, the invisible burden of regulating emotions while supporting learners in distress. She thought about how draining it must be to balance calmness for one child while keeping the rest of the class steady.

As another teacher shared, each day is a struggle of patience and resilience (TFP7-P46-IQ3). She mentioned ...

*I had a student who comes to school every day nga maghilak, mag tantrums and worst part is voilent siya... magshout siya nga 'I will kill her, f*** you, f*** her.'... Ako na lang gyud ginabuhay kay musagang ug mangisog... 30 minutes, ginapakalma ra nako siya. Kung kalma na siya, diha pa mi magsugod samo lesson. (I had a student who came to school every day crying and having tantrums, and the worst part was that he became violent. He would shout things like, "I will kill her, f*** you, f*** her." All I could really do was stay calm and patient. For about 30 minutes, I would just focus on calming him down. Once he was calm, that was the only time we could start our lesson.)*

This account illustrates this reality. Thirty minutes of calming a distressed, aggressive child before instruction could start. Words reveal the invisible and visible bruises teachers carry, the emotional toll of absorbing storms, and the quiet courage required to stand steady in chaos.

Another teacher shared with amusement and disbelief in her tone (TFP9 P58-IQ4) ...

One time, a parent cried kay dili daw mo-sleep ang bata unless ma-follow ang bedtime routine exactly. Gi-invite ko nila sa balay. Gi-tudluan nako sila step-by-step, same lights, same tone of voice, same order sa tasks. After a week, nag-message ang mama, 'Teacher, he slept easily tonight. That moment, dili lang ko teacher, I became a bridge between stress and peace. (One time, a parent cried because their child would not sleep unless the bedtime routine was followed exactly. They invited me to their home. I taught them step-by-step: the same lights, the same tone of voice, and the same order of tasks. After a week, the mother sent me a message, "Teacher, he slept easily tonight." At that moment, I was not just a teacher; I became a bridge between stress and peace.)

Her story both touching and powerful. The way she turned a stressful routine into peace for the child and family shows the deeper role teachers play. It is more than instruction; it is being a bridge between chaos and calm, guiding not just learners but parents toward relief and hope.

Finally, a participant revealed, the sting of dismissal cuts deep, echoing the contradiction at the heart of their profession. She said with disbelief in her eyes (TFP2-P16-IQ4) ...

Some people admire what we do but others see SPED as less academic, less important, or even as babysitting. People think it is just 'dealing with behavior.' A colleague casually said, 'At least your subject is not hard to teach. You just handle behavior.' Hearing that minimized the value of my work.

The researcher felt the sting in her words, being dismissed as “just handling behavior” minimizes the depth and value of SPED work. It is disheartening when dedication and expertise are reduced to babysitting, because in truth, it takes immense skill, patience, and heart to guide learners with unique needs. This experience highlights the unfair contradiction of being admired by some yet undervalued by others.

The painful minimization of SPED teaching, where expertise is reduced to “handling behavior,” erasing the science, planning, and emotional strength required to sustain learners who rely on routines for stability.

Ultimately, being reduced to behavior managers underscores the urgent need to dismantle these pervasive misconceptions. Recognition must move beyond superficial praise to affirm the technical, scientific, and emotionally demanding nature of SPED teaching. Only then can teachers’ professional identities be validated, their contributions fully acknowledged, and their work with learners on the Autism Spectrum honored for the depth and complexity it truly embodies.

The Sources of their Behaviors, Rights, and Duties

The voices of SPED teachers in this study resound like lanterns flickering in the storm, fragile yet unyielding, illuminating the paradox of resilience and exhaustion. DepEd’s Special Education policy outlines the rights of learners and duties of teachers, but in practice, these promises often demand great effort and sacrifice.

One participant recognized that her role and struggles are framed by DepEd’s mandate. She said (TFP1-P3-IQ2) ...

I have the right to training, collaboration, and a safe environment to effectively meet my learner’s needs while maintaining my well-being.

Her statement reflects how the Department of Education’s (DepEd) mandate frames both her rights and her struggles. By asserting her right to training, collaboration, and a safe environment, she points to the very supports DepEd policy promises but does not always deliver consistently. While the policy acknowledges these rights, its true test lies in implementation ensuring that teachers not only know their entitlements but actually experience them in daily practice.

Another participant mentioned with a hint of pain in her voice (TFP9-P57 IQ2)...

My experience with my rights kay mixed. Naay days nga supported ka, naay days nga murag wala. Handling ASD learners nga strict sa routine kay lisod, and sometimes dili makita sa school ang emotional load. Pero when they recognize it, grabe ka-light sa feeling. When they do not, murag ikaw ra nagbuhat sa tanan. (My experience with my rights is mixed. There are days when you feel supported, and days when it feels like you're not. Handling ASD learners who are strict with routines is difficult, and sometimes the school does not see the emotional load. But when they do recognize it, the feeling is incredibly light. When they do not, it feels like you are doing everything alone.)

The researcher could see the pain in her tightened expression, caught between moments of support and times of being overlooked. Her words show how DepEd's policies don't always translate into consistent support. While trainings and recognition reflect the policy's intent, the gaps she feels, days of being left alone reveal weak implementation. DepEd must strengthen enforcement, so teachers' rights are not just written in policy but felt in daily practice.

A teacher also mentioned some realities that special education teachers, often under the guise of DepEd's policy (TFP6-P39-IQ2), saying ...

My lived experience is a mix of feeling supported and sometimes forgotten. SPED teaching is specialized, pero dili tanan institutions treat it that way. There are days I feel my rights are respected like when trainings are provided or when the school acknowledges the difficulty of behavior management. Pero naa pud days nga murag kami ra'y bahala sa among kaugalingon. (My lived experience is a mix of feeling supported and sometimes forgotten. SPED teaching is specialized, but not all institutions treat it that way. There are days when I feel my rights are respected, such as when trainings are provided or when the school acknowledges the difficulty of behavior management. But there are also days when it feels like we are left to handle everything on our own.)

This reflection exposes how DepEd's policies, while designed to support teachers, often fall short in practice. The inconsistency she describes sometimes receiving training and acknowledgment, but other times being left to manage alone shows a gap between policy intent and lived reality. DepEd's framework must not remain symbolic; it should translate into consistent, enforceable support that recognizes the specialized demands of SPED teaching. Otherwise, policies risk becoming mere rhetoric, leaving teachers to rely on personal resilience instead of systemic backing.

Teachers are like steady guides for learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder, helping them feel safe through routines even though the work can be exhausting and emotionally demanding. Rights promised in policy, support aides, sensory materials, sustained training too often arrive as mirages, leaving educators to improvise with empty hands.

Another participant explicitly tied his experiences to policy gaps (TFP2 P12-IQ2), saying ...

Handling learners with ASD who need strict routines requires more emotional energy, more preparation, and more specialized knowledge. But my rights as a teacher in terms of support, resources, training, and workload consideration don't always match the demands of the job.

His words highlight how DepEd's policies have clear gaps when applied to the realities of SPED teaching. The demands of handling ASD learners requiring extra preparation, emotional energy, and specialized knowledge are not matched by consistent rights in terms of training, resources, or workload support. DepEd must bridge this gap, so policies truly reflect the lived challenges of teachers, ensuring that rights are not just stated but sustained in practice.

One participant proudly, yet with visible tiredness in her eyes, mentioned (TFP8-P52-IQ3) ...

I once helped a parent develop a home routine because the child refused to sleep unless a specific bedtime step was followed. The parent was exhausted. I guided them through a modified routine, and within a week, the child's sleep improved. That moment made me realize teacher roles extend far beyond the classroom.

This shows how teacher roles often extend beyond the classroom, yet DepEd's policies rarely account for this hidden labor. Helping a parent build a home routine reflects dedication. DepEd must broaden its policies to recognize and support these extra responsibilities, so teachers aren't left carrying them alone.

Lastly, another participant added with exhaustion in her eyes (TFP7-P46 IQ3) ...

My roles expanded more than I expected. I become the child's safe person, the translator of their cues, and the bridge between school and home routines. Usahay mura kog routine architect, ako ang naga-design sa flow para manageable sa bata. (My roles expanded more than I expected. I became the child's safe person, the translator of their cues, and the bridge between school and home routines. Sometimes I feel like a routine architect, the one designing the flow so it becomes manageable for the child.)

The researcher found herself moved by the quiet heroism in these accounts, the teacher who calms a violent child for thirty minutes before a lesson, the one who breathes through exhaustion to shield fragile emotions, the one who improvises with nothing but patience and compassion. These narratives highlight that policy extends beyond written text, taking shape in the lived experiences, steadfast commitment, and often unseen

sacrifices of teachers who carry both challenges and courage into their classrooms. The results, therefore, illuminate a paradox: resilience coexisting with depletion, recognition promised yet withheld, and systemic support still waiting to catch up with the courage already burning in the hearts of SPED educators.

The interviews paint a picture of SPED teachers as dedicated, compassionate, and resilient professionals who play a critical role in supporting learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, they face significant challenges related to workload, resources, and the need for greater understanding and support from the wider community. The findings underscore the importance of addressing these issues to ensure the well being and effectiveness of SPED teachers, ultimately benefiting the students they serve.

Summary of Findings

The Special Education (SPED) teachers working with learners diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) demonstrate the following behaviors: resilience, patience, structured practice, and compassion. They have the right to consistent support aides, adequate training, sufficient resources and materials, and recognition and respect. They also have the duties to provide the necessary care for learners with ASD, to advocate for their educational and developmental needs, to mediate between parents and therapists, and to bridge school routines with home routines.

The sources of these behaviors, rights, and duties are rooted in DepEd's Special Education policy. These components of teachers' work are rooted in policy because DepEd provides the official framework that shapes what teachers are expected to do, what support they should receive, and how their professional identity is formed.

DISCUSSION

In this part of the study, the researcher discussed the findings of the SPED teachers' experiences while handling learners with ASD based from the results of the study. Presented as well, is the future direction of the study.

The Behaviors of Special Education Teachers Handling Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder

In this study, the researcher found that the behaviors of Special Education (SPED) teachers handling learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are deeply shaped by resilience, patience, structured practice, and compassion. With this, it supports the claim of Dumilig and Napila (2025), asserting that endurance and patience as indispensable qualities that sustain teachers in the face of daily challenges, while resilience emerges as a dynamic process of adapting to disruptions and reframing setbacks. Similarly, the current finding aligns with Love et al. (2020), who asserted that teacher self-efficacy in ASD contexts, showing that resilience and endurance are intertwined with stress management and professional identity. Together, these studies suggest that teachers'

behaviors reflect both strength and vulnerability as they navigate the demands of their role.

With this finding, the researcher challenges Abaya (2025), who asserted that SPED teachers in rural schools in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), Philippines, and found that high stress levels and low self-efficacy often hindered their ability to sustain endurance. Unlike the resilience focused claims, this study emphasizes that systemic support and psychological well-being are prerequisites for resilience.

The Rights of Special Education Teachers Handling Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The researcher found that the rights of SPED teachers handling learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in this study are right to consistent support aides, right to adequate training, right to sufficient resources and materials, and right to recognition and respect yet it revealed a powerful contradiction, clearly articulated in policy yet inconsistently recognized in practice. While their patience, resilience, and endurance are remarkable, these behaviors are too often demanded without the consistent support and recognition they deserve. The finding affirms Kasari et al. (2021), who stated that adequate adult support in classrooms is essential for addressing the complex needs of learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Moreover, the findings correspond with Barros (2025), who claimed that support systems of SPED teachers in the Philippines, finding that administrative, peer, and parental support significantly affect teacher retention and job satisfaction.

Grounded in this result, the researcher disputes Garwood et al. (2023), who suggested that adding personnel does not automatically alleviate teacher burden. Although assuming multiple roles simultaneously as a teacher, aide, behavior therapist, and crisis responder creates severe role overload, the presence of paraprofessionals can sometimes increase teacher stress due to the additional responsibilities of managing and coordinating with support staff. Moreover, having classroom aides or adequate resources does not guarantee reduced burnout; the effectiveness of support staff depends on clear role definitions, quality of collaboration, and supervision.

The Duties of Special Education Teachers Handling Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The researcher found that the perceptions of SPED teachers in this study revealed the immense scope of their duties when handling learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) which are caregivers, mediators, advocates, and family guidance. In support of this, United Nations Children's Fund (2022), reported that inclusive education in the Philippines places heavy responsibilities on SPED teachers, who must balance instructional duties with advocacy, family guidance, and emotional support. This study's result aligns with Alipongan (2025), who emphasized that teachers' duties include not only instructional tasks but also managing behaviors, guiding families, and advocating for learners' needs.

While role expansion can be challenging for SPED teachers, some studies show it does not always lead to stress or reduced morale. The researcher contests Kim and Hur (2022), who argued that structured team teaching and shared responsibilities in inclusive classrooms help teachers manage overlapping roles effectively, improving both satisfaction and instruction.

The Sources of Behaviors, Rights, and Duties of Special Education Teachers in Handling Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The school's policy and DepEd's policy framework underscores a persistent gap between the behaviors, rights and duties of Special Education teachers articulated in DepEd's Special Education policy and their uneven enactment at the school level. Teachers describe alternating experiences of recognition and neglect, revealing fragile support that forces reliance on personal resilience. Thus, the finding validates the claim of Llurag (2023), who asserted that while laws and frameworks articulate rights to training, collaboration, and inclusive environments, implementation remains inconsistent, leaving teachers to rely on personal resilience. This current finding echoed Kilag et al. (2022), who examined that despite strong legal frameworks like the Magna Carta and Inclusive Education Act, weak enforcement and limited resources force teachers to manage heavy workloads with little support. Both studies stress the need for consistent policy enforcement and resource allocation so inclusive education becomes genuinely practiced.

With this, the researcher offers a counterpoint to Cornejo (2024), who documented localized progress in Bataan schools, particularly through Inclusive Learning Resource Centers and K–12 reforms. It shows that policy translation into practice is possible at the local level, offering concrete examples of inclusive education being implemented effectively. The emerging theme on school and DepEd policy in SPED reveals how institutional promises often dissolve like ink washed away by rain, leaving teachers to carry the weight of unmet needs with bare hands. Policies meant to safeguard equity and inclusion too often remain fragile words on paper, offering sporadic training, rationed resources, and absent support staff, while teachers improvise, spend from their own pockets, and endure exhaustion in silence. These gaps are not minor inconveniences but fault lines that fracture classrooms, forcing resilience to become survival rather than strength.

Conclusions

Educational policymakers may critically review and amend existing policies to ensure that SPED teachers are equipped with the necessary supports to enact their roles effectively. This involves fostering the development of proper professional behaviors, clarifying and reinforcing duties, and guaranteeing the provision of rights such as training, resources, support aides, and recognition. Strengthening these areas will not only maximize teachers' performance but also promote resilience, equity, and sustainability in Special Education practice, ultimately improving outcomes for learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Modified Paradigm

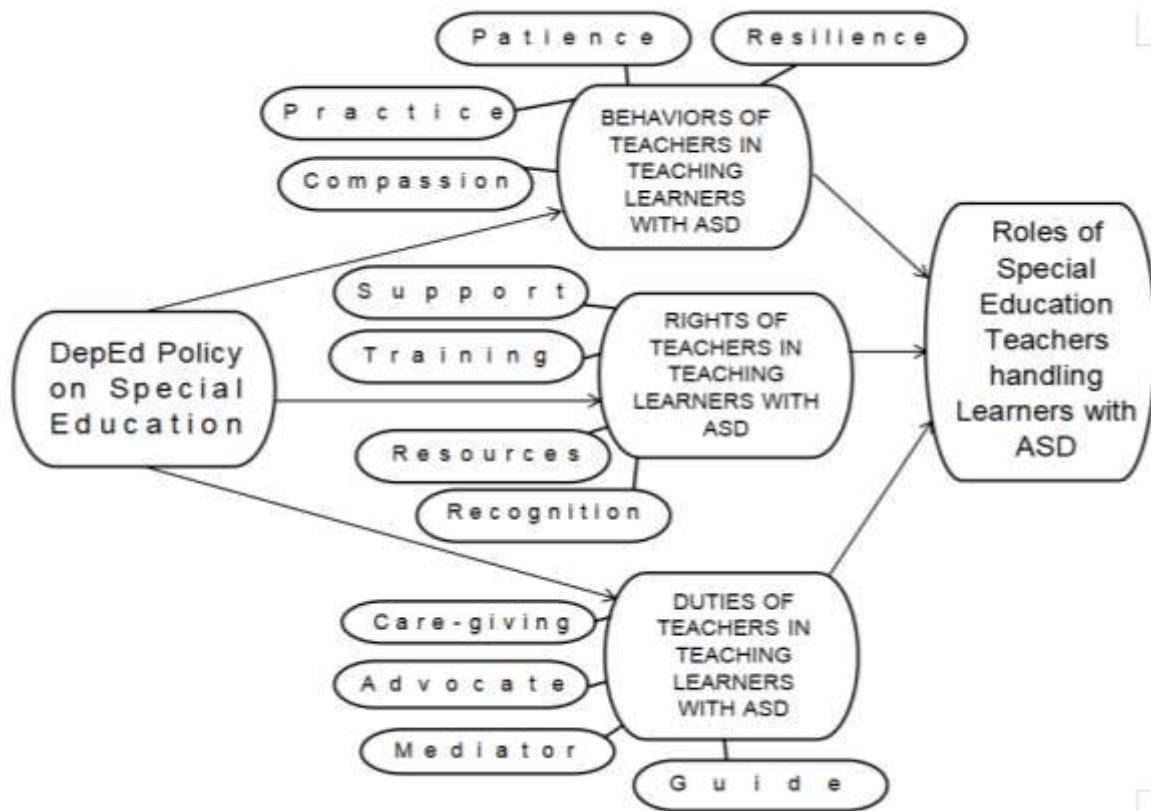


Figure 2: Modified Paradigm of Role Theory - Ralph Linton

Recommendations

Future research may adopt a multiple linear progression framework to examine how the behaviors, rights, and duties of Special Education teachers function as dynamic and interrelated components that collectively shape their professional roles in handling learners with ASD. In parallel, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) may be employed to develop and validate quantitative instruments that capture these variables and their latent constructs. Moreover, mediating analysis may be pursued to investigate how behaviors, rights, and duties act as mediators in the relationship between educational policy and teachers' enacted roles, thereby clarifying the mechanisms through which systemic provisions are translated into practice.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The four elements of trustworthiness in qualitative research are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The researcher ensured credibility by providing an accurate and believable representation of the participants' experiences. Before data collection, the researcher secured an endorsement from the Graduate School

Dean, obtained approval from the school administration and the ethics committee, and formally informed the division-level education authority. Participants were identified based on inclusion criteria, briefed on the purpose of the study, and provided with informed consent forms outlining confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time (World Health Organization, 2022). During data collection, the researcher conducted 30-40-minute semi-structured interviews using a prepared guide, asked both main and probing questions, and audio-recorded sessions with permission while taking notes to capture additional observations (Creswell & Poth, 2023). These steps ensured that the accounts gathered were accurate, believable, and reflective of participants' realities.

Transferability was achieved through detailed and rich descriptions so that the findings can be applied to similar contexts. By documenting the process of participant selection, ethical clearances, and the conduct of interviews, the study provides sufficient contextual detail for readers to assess whether the findings may be applicable to similar educational settings. The systematic use of the thematic analysis approach further supports the development of themes that can resonate across comparable contexts, allowing other researchers and practitioners to draw meaningful parallels (Nowell et al., 2020).

The researcher established dependability by maintaining consistency in the research process and providing clear documentation, including the audit trail. Clear documentation was kept at every stage, including ethical approvals, informed consent procedures, interview protocols, audio recordings, and verbatim transcriptions. An audit trail was established by recording methodological decisions and analytic steps, from coding to theme development. This consistency demonstrates that the study could be replicated or adapted in similar contexts with reliable outcomes (Tracy, 2020).

Finally, confirmability was upheld by grounding the findings in the participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's biases. Key details were confirmed with participants when needed, ensuring accuracy in representation. The use of verbatim transcription preserved the authenticity of teachers' voices, while systematic coding and theme development minimized subjective interpretation. Ethical approval from the Society of Moral Integrity and Legal Ethics (SMILE), the official ethics review body of HCDC, further validated that the study adhered to established standards for responsible social research. This alignment with ethical and methodological rigor underscores that the insights reflect participants' experiences rather than personal assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 2020).

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APA Citation:

Adobas, A. H.-C. P. (2026). LIFE INSIDE A SPINNING WHEEL: PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS HANDLING LEARNERS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER. *Ignatian International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 4(6), 1270–1292. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20704821>

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