

A Phenomenological Study of SPED Student Teachers Assigned in Non-SPED Classrooms: Basis for Curriculum Enhancement

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Abstract: This phenomenological study portrays the lived experiences of some Special Education (SPED) Student Teachers of Cebu Normal University, a state university, in Cebu City, who taught in non-SPED classrooms during their pre-service teaching during the first semester of school year 2014-2015. This paper looks into the challenges, adjustments, coping mechanisms and the meaning of these experiences for the twenty-two (22) SPED student teachers participants who were willing to participate in the study. The researchers made use of the descriptive phenomenological approach following the Husserlian philosophy and Colaizzi's data analysis. They performed 'bracketing' activities before conducting semi-structured interviews with the participants who gave their informed consent. The highlights of the experiences of these student teachers are condensed in the following themes: "Straining Training"; "The Big Three: Classroom Management, Standards of Mentors and Making of Lesson Plans"; "Four P's: Pray, Prepare the lessons, Practice and Positive mindset"; "Classroom CEO"; "A Blessing in Disguise"; "Half-baked Teachers"; "Ready for Battle" and "The Power of the Mind." Results also showed that the SPED student teachers still consider the whole experience worthwhile and beneficial despite "seeming unpreparedness" since it's like hitting two birds with one stone – one gets exposed not only to SPED but also the non-SPED classrooms in the process.

Keywords: Special Education student teacher, SPED classroom, regular classroom, descriptive phenomenology experiences, challenges, adjustments, coping mechanism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Student Practice Teaching is considered as the main highlight of the four-year education course. It is also viewed as the core of the teacher education course curriculum (Teacher Education Handbook, 2012). It is designed to provide student teachers with the general knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for effective teaching (Gordon in Pogoy, 2010). It is the culminating experience during which student teachers transform their preparation for teaching into professional classroom practice. It provides opportunities for students to inquire, experience and to reflect on the subtleties and complexities of the classroom including the moral and technical dimensions of teaching. The learning, both formal and informal, which occurs in schools and other settings will be a central concern in the internship experiences of student teaching (Lovat in Pogoy, 2010).

Moreover, student practice teaching is the most awaited moment for some students but most often than not, it is seen as one of the nerve-wrecking experiences in a college life of an educator that scares many to the bones even years before the actual student teaching.

According to Rose and Church (in Lim, Cock, Lock & Brook, 2009) one key factor in the success of practice teaching is the giving of feedback. They found this practice to be the most commonly used training component and one that "consistently emerged as the variable producing the strongest training effect." Feedback is critical to quality improvement (Lang, 2012). It is powerful as it helps people get on track. It serves as a guide to assess people or fine tune academic programs.

In order for a Teacher Education Institution (TEI) to know if the pre-service training they provide to aspiring educators is adequate for them, there is a need to ask for feedback from the pre-service teachers themselves. It is through the feedback that the school administrators and faculty members will get to evaluate the academic program's strengths and weaknesses. This will serve as base line information for its enhancement or improvement. It is also a way of assessing whether or not the training they have given to the pre-service teachers is sufficient and useful. Furthermore, from the feedback, glimpses of the pre-service training life of the student teachers are generally unravelled.

Student teaching literature over the last several years has slowly begun to develop, mostly from the USA and western countries (Thomas & Davis, 2000 in McMillan & Wergin, 2013). However, empirical studies about student teaching are still very limited (Lagas, 2012), and no phenomenological inquiry has been previously conducted specifically about students teachers who are specialized in special education (SPED) in the in the Philippine context. The researchers wanted to help expand the landscape of knowledge related to the individual perspectives of SPED students teachers with the hope that the results will provide a gateway to explore, describe and document their precious experiences, straight from *the horse's mouth*. This will thereby add to the existing body of knowledge which will assist the pre-service SPED teachers to brace themselves with confidence for the real world of work. It will also provide a basis for some administrative decisions and policy-making to enhance the curriculum and instruction.

This research aims to gain a deeper understanding on the lived experiences - the challenges, struggles, adjustments and their coping mechanisms of the SPED student teachers of Cebu Normal University, a state university in Cebu City, during the first semester of school year 2014 – 2015. Moreover, these SPED student participants 'fortunately' or 'unfortunately' were assigned to teach in non-SPED classrooms during their Student Practice Teaching. It also seeks to assess whether the curriculum provided by the academe is relevant and useful to the actual practice teaching. These are viewed very helpful as basis for curriculum revisiting and enrichment to really prepare these future teachers for the real challenges ahead.

Specifically, this study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) What are the highlights of the lived experiences of SPED student teachers tasked to teach in non-SPED classrooms? (2) How was the preparation provided to them through the program's curriculum? and (3) What for them, is the meaning of SPED students teachers teaching in regular classrooms?

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Pre-service teaching is the basic foundation for the development of professional and personal qualities of a teacher (Chong, Wong & Lang, in Lewin, 2004). It opens an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to the new perspectives and innovations as well as equips them with the knowledge, values and skills, which include disciplinary content or subject knowledge, pedagogical skills as well as positive attitude and ethical values (Wilke, in Ozer, 2004). It is an integral part of the curriculum for pre-service teachers in order to put their content knowledge, skills and values into practice in the real classroom setting.

Field experiences among pre-service teachers as cited by Arnette and Freeburg (2008) refer to the entire range of in-school experiences, including structured observations, course related field experiences and pre-service teaching. They are meant to provide students a career experience and help develop skills appropriate to work and the work environment. In this case, pre service teachers will receive skills to use their knowledge to think critically, to collaborate, to communicate, to solve problems, to create and to continue to learn (Kozma in Seward, 2009). It is a culminating activity (Pogoy and Montalbo, 2010) wherein the teacher education institution provides the pre service teachers the opportunity to teach in a professional classroom practice. For the aim of the teacher education institution is not merely of preparing the best teachers they can have but also to adapt the new teacher education innovations in a complex, rapidly changing world (UNESCO, 2008).

Furthermore, the need for more innovative teaching pedagogy will supplement in producing the most effective teachers. According to Lopez and Tormenta (in Pogoy, 2010), the construction of the professional identity of a teacher begins even before pre-service training and develops during pre-service training and throughout the professional trajectory, as a function of the desires and personal conditions of the teacher and of the challenges or obstacles in the contexts in which the teacher operates.

Increasingly, the aims of the Teacher Education Institutions is to re-think how they can most effectively prepare future teachers (Kozma in Seward, 2009) to teach the needed skills for the professional and personal development of the pre-service teachers on their actual classroom exposure. Through localization and globalization, Cheng (in Seward, 2009) enumerated that there are multiple sources of learning. For example, there are self-learning programs and packages, web-based learning, outside experts, and community experiential programs inside and outside their institutions, locally and globally. With these avenues for learning, the pre-service teachers can have a wide variety of opportunity for learning experiences.

Contemporary literature challenges how receptive students are to the knowledge and perspectives teacher educators deliver (Chong in Ajuwon, 2014). A key component of such understanding rests on the idea of a teaching belief . That is, what it means to teach and how such a belief may develop and change (Wilke in Ajuwon, 2014). In addition, a growing body of research suggests that not only must teacher educators address issues of course structure, content and articulation in improving teacher education, they must also take into account the professional and personal aspects that pre-service teachers bring with them prior to the teacher education programme and how they develop during their training years (Pajares in Ozer, 2004).

World Health Organization (WHO) defines, pre-service as the activities which take place before a person takes the real work experience which requires specific training. Properly speaking, it is also a coursework for graduates which exposes them to the real on-the-job setting that provides them the competence needed to perform well on their chosen field of profession. They also emphasized that the expressions “pre-service education” or “pre-service training” are used to refer to any structured activity aimed at developing or reinforcing knowledge and skills before a professional enters his public or private practice (<http://www.emro.who.int/child-health/IMCI-preservice-training/what-is-it>).

Pelleter (in Ord, 2012) implied that the main purpose of internship in teaching is to provide prospective teachers the opportunities to increase their professional competence as they gradually assume greater responsibilities of being a teacher under the guidance of experienced personnel. It is also supported by Cheng(Lim, Cock, Lock & Brook, 2009) that pre-service education will develop prospective teachers as facilitators who have high-level professional competence to create unlimited opportunities for students’ learning and multiple and sustainable developments. Internship is regarded as the most significant aspect of learning to teach. (Rajuan, Beijaard, and Verloop in Lewin, 2004). Training pre-service educators is a lengthy process, and one that should be filled with high quality learning experiences based on sound theoretical principles. Internship teaching programs play a significant in the preparation of a highly qualified teaching work force, which is necessary to support the development of a complex 21st century society (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003).

The professional experience or practicum is often regarded as the most important component of the pre-service teacher education program (Turner & Sharp, 2006; House of Representatives: Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007). Whereas the requirements of the practicum vary in every region, it is widely acknowledged that the mentor teacher/cooperating teacher/supervising teacher plays a key role in the professional experience of pre-service teachers (except in some countries where teachers are without professional qualifications, and the responsibility remains with the teacher education institutions (Lim, Cock, Lock and Brook, 2009). Atputhasamy (in Ajuwon, 2012) emphasizes the importance of adequate support structures for pre-service teachers and their mentor teachers, and suggests that pre-service teachers need most guidance on their teaching of subject content effectively, and on their classroom management.

In the United States of America, teacher education programs have increased the field experiences to prepare the pre-service teachers to meet the needs of diverse students when they graduate and establish more thorough admission process to the teacher education program (Kent, 2007). While in India, teacher education is a continuous process, and its pre-service and in-service components are inseparable (UGC in Pogoy, 2010).

In the Philippines, student teaching or internship is considered as the final stage of the education course. (Pogoy & Montalbo, 2010). It provides opportunities for students to teach, experiment, and reflect on the complexities of the classroom including the moral and technical dimensions of teaching. The Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) require the pre-service teachers to tke full advantage of their experiences on the teaching-learning processes. Its primary concern is the training of the prospective teachers who will professionally and socially meet the standards that will enhance their position in the classroom, on the campus and in the community where they will ultimately work or live (Reganit & Osea, 2004). Many prerequisites have been stipulated by different colleges and universities to interns in order to maximize their learning experiences on the teaching and learning process.

3. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Practice teaching is an experiential learning process basically anchored on the theory “Leaning by Doing” of John Dewey and the theory of Behaviourism, specifically the “Law of Exercise” by E. Thorndike (Gandhi, 2010).

Learning by doing (or experiential learning) is based on the following three assumptions:

1. People learn best when they are personally involved in the learning experience;
2. Knowledge has to be discovered by the individual if it is to have any significant meaning to them or make a difference in their behaviour; and
3. The persons’ commitment to learning is highest when they are free to set their own learning objectives and are able to actively pursue them within a given framework

Moreover, when we experience something, we act upon it, we do something; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return: such is the peculiar combination. The connection of these two phases of experience measures the fruitfulness of experience for mere activity does not constitute experience (Dewey, 1916).

Experience for Dewey is our ‘lived’ experience. The experience is at the heart of experiential learning. Therefore it is not something separate or additional but something which embraces the lives of individuals.

Meanwhile, Edward Thorndike’s second law of learning is the ‘Law of Exercise’, which means that drill, or practice coupled with feedback helps in increasing efficiency and durability of learning. According to Thorndike’s S-R Bond Theory, the connections are strengthened with training or practice and the connections are weakened when training or practice is discontinued. The ‘law of exercise’, therefore, is also understood as the ‘law of use and disuse’ in which case, connections or bonds made in the brain cortex are weakened or loosened.

4. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the findings reported in this study contribute to the body of knowledge regarding SPED students doing practice teaching in non-SPED classrooms, the results of this qualitative study, are not meant to be generalized or transferable to a wider population of the student teachers. Despite this, the aim of the study is still achieved – which is to illumine and provide a rich description of the experiences of these SPED students enabling deeper understanding and giving valuable insights into the dynamics of the lived experiences of these SPED student teachers doing practice teaching in non-SPED classrooms.

5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researchers tried their best to follow the research ethics protocol. They gave a brief background of the study to the prospective participants, underscoring its merits and benefits. The researchers then asked for the participants’ informed consent. Once the participants expressed their willingness to be interviewed, only then did the interview begin. They also asked permission for the audiotaping of the conversation for greater accuracy of the data collection. The participants were also assured of the confidentiality and anonymity that would be strictly observed. The interview questions were open-ended questions which include the joys/successes and challenges/struggles of the student teachers, and the preparation and coping mechanism of the participants applied to adapt to their “unique” situation. The participants were also asked to fill up a written form about their demographical data. The demographic data on participants were stored separately from the transcripts of the interviews culled from the voice recorders.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study makes use of descriptive phenomenological study based on Husserlian philosophical approach and Colaizzi’s method of data analysis to allow the researchers to gain a rich and deeper understanding of the student teachers’ lived experiences. The underlying assumption of Husserlian philosophy is that there are multiple ways of experiencing and interpreting the same event or situation, and that the meaning of the phenomenon to each person is what constitutes reality (McMillan, J. & Wergin, J. 2013). Descriptive phenomenology, a type of qualitative research, is regarded as a valuable methodical tool for focusing on research questions to probe and enlighten about a phenomenon by providing descriptions in rich detail and revealing meanings of the circumstances (O’Brien in Kornhaber, 2009).

The main instruments of this study were the researchers themselves who conducted in-depth interviews with the participants to generate data about the participants' personal and professional experiences. Since the goal of phenomenological interviewing is to describe the meaning of some particular events, from the lens of the participants and *not* of the researchers, a central concern is for the researchers to hold in abeyance, one's own presuppositions regarding the experience to be described – a process termed “bracketing” (Pollo, Henley & Thompson, in Kornhaber, 2009). It refers to the suspension of one's beliefs, assumptions, preconceptions and biases related to the phenomenon under investigation so that the phenomenon can be seen with a fresh approach. This is a fundamental concept aligned to Husserlian philosophy which ensures a trustworthy description of the phenomenon.

Bracketing strategies used by the researchers included suspension of the literature review until after the analysis of data had occurred as well as making the interviewer-researchers sensitive to their own issues. So before the interview of the participants, the researchers wrote down in their logbooks their own presuppositions about the phenomenon under study.

The focus of the present research is the Special Education (SPED) Student Teacher participants' perspectives on their lived experiences in teaching in non-SPED classrooms. The researchers utilized purposeful sampling to select the participants. The study participants were students of Cebu Normal University, a state university in Cebu City, during the school year 2014-2015. Furthermore, they met the selection criteria as SPED student teachers assigned to non-SPED classrooms during their practice teaching, school year 2014-2015.

There were many students who passed the selection criteria and were willing to be interviewed. However, when the researchers finished interviewing twenty-two (22) participants, there was no new information extracted– an indicator that the point of saturation has already been reached. Hence, the researchers ended the data gathering and continued with the next steps.

In line with Collaizi's method of data collection (Sanders, 2003), the researchers listened to the audiotape several times before transcribing them to gain a sense of the *whole experience* of the participants and acquire a feeling for the participants' ideas. They distilled significant statements, after which they proceeded to the formulation of meanings and themes.

Participants of the Study:

This study involves twenty-two (22) student teachers of Cebu Normal University, a state university in Cebu City as participants. They are taking up Bachelor of Elementary Education – major in Special Education (BEEd SpEd) and had already been into practice teaching in non-SPED classrooms during the first semester of school year 2014-2015. Their ages range from 19-21 years old, three (3) of them are males and nineteen (19) are females. Details are as follows:

Demographic Profile of Participants:

Participant No.	Age	Sex	Civil Status	Grade Level Handled in Practice Teaching	
				Homebase	Upper/Lower Level
1	20	Female	Single	Grade 5	Grade 1
2	20	Female	Single	Grade 5	Grade 1
3	20	Female	Single	Grade 1	Grade 5
4	20	Female	Single	Grade 6	Grade 4
5	19	Female	Single	Grade 1	Grade 5
6	20	Female	Single	Multigrade	Grade 3
7	20	Female	Single	Grade 6	Grade 4
8	21	Male	Single	Grade 4	Grade 6
9	20	Female	Single	Grade 3	Multigrade
10	21	Female	Single	Grade 5	Grade 1
11	21	Male	Single	Multigrade	Grade 3
12	19	Female	Single	Grade 2	Grade 3
13	21	Male	Single	Grade 3	Multigrade
14	20	Female	Single	Grade 3	Multigrade
15	20	Female	Single	Grade 2	Grade 3

16	20	Female	Single	Grade 4	Grade 6
17	20	Female	Single	Grade 1	Grade 5
18	20	Female	Single	Grade 5	Grade 1
19	19	Female	Single	Grade 4	Grade 6
20	19	Female	Single	Grade 2	Grade 3
21	20	Female	Single	Grade 2	Grade 3
22	19	Female	Single	Grade 4	Grade 6

7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The highlights of the lived experiences of the student teachers are condensed in the following themes:

1. "Straining Training"
2. "The Big Three: Classroom management, standards of mentors and making of Lesson Plans"
3. "Four P's: Pray, Prepare the lessons, Practice and Positive mindset"
4. "Classroom CEO"
5. "A Blessing in Disguise"
6. "Half-baked Teachers"
7. "Ready for Battle"
8. "The Power of the Mind"

Theme 1: "Straining Training"

The participants, students taking up Bachelor of Elementary Education – SPED, are prepared to teach children with special needs. However, two-thirds of the duration of their whole student practice teaching was spent on teaching regular students. According to Lopez and Tormenta (Gandhi, 2010), "the construction of the professional identity of a teacher begins even before pre-service training and develops during pre-service training and throughout the professional trajectory, as a function of the desires and personal conditions of the teacher and of the challenges or obstacles in the contexts in which the teacher operates".

Some sort of "mismatch" occurred due to the real scenario that in the Philippines that the pupils with special needs are *far less* in number than regular students. So, classrooms for special children are consequently less in number. Understandably, not all the SPED student teachers can be accommodated in special classrooms. Most of them are assigned to regular classrooms.

The participants found the student teaching experience in non-SPED classrooms stressful and tiring but worth it and fun. As a participant shared:

"It was a very rich experience teaching in a non-SPED class. I had a lot of experiences from adjusting in a regular class in terms of handling the students and in preparing the lessons to the enjoyable moments with the students." (P22)

"It was very challenging, enjoyable, sometimes it's very stressful but overall it's very fulfilling most especially when you see your students enjoying and learning because of your varied activities. You will surely miss their hugs, kakulitan, care and love." (P6)

Participants 3 and 27 added that

"Super kakapoy! The mentors are very demanding. Some of the students kay mga gahi ug ulo, sabaan ug kiatan. Though daghan ug sleepless nights, still worth it gihapon because some of the mentors will give good grades." (P27)

(Very tiring! The mentors are very demanding. Some of the students were hardheaded, noisy and hyperactive. Though there were many sleepless nights, it was still worth it because some of the mentors will give good grades.)

"Ang akong three years nga pagkat-on ug pag-antos sa undergraduate studies, wala ra jud sa kakapoy/stress/pag-antos sa halos 4 ra ka buwan nga pagtudlo sa non-SpEd classroom. But the experience cannot be paid off. The attention and the participation of the students during my discussion relieve all the hard work. Bravo!" (P3)

(My stress in three years in the undergraduate level was nothing compared to that of my four months of practice teaching in a non-SpEd classroom. But the experience cannot be paid off. The attention and the participation of the students during my discussion relieve all the hard work. Bravo!)

Theme 2: “The Big Three: Classroom management, standards of mentors and making of Lesson Plans”

Some of the participants remarked that surviving student teaching in Non-SPED classrooms ‘is not easy but not impossible either.’ Their major concerns were on lesson planning and classroom management. They were able to cope with all those challenges they’ve faced through their spirituality, support system and positive mindset.

The whole practice teaching experience, although fulfilling, was never easy. What made such experience worthwhile were the challenges that they faced and surpassed. According to Dr. Bob Kizlik (2014), the #1 area of concern of new teachers is their feelings of inadequacy in managing classrooms. Classroom management and management of student conduct are skills that teachers acquire and hone over time. These skills almost never “jell” until after a minimum of few years of teaching experience. The top three challenges were classroom management, different standards of mentors and lesson planning. As mentioned by a participant:

“First, lesson plan kay dili pareho ug method nga gigamit ang mentors. Second, students kay very pating and kiat especially Grade 5 pero sweet kayo ang Grade 1. Third, classroom management. Lisud kayo kay limited imong time unya hard-headed kayo ang mga students. Last ka yang mentors, mga terror kaayo” (P1)

(First, the mentors have different methods in making lesson plans. Second, the students were very naughty especially the students in Grade 5 but on the contrary, the Grade 1 pupils were very sweet. Third, was the classroom management. It was very hard considering we had limited time yet the students were very hardheaded. Lastly, the

Managing the classroom and the students were the main challenges that participant 20 faced.

“Classroom management was my number one concern. The students tend to be “complacent” because of the fact that I am only a student teacher. It is instilled in their minds that they only give little respect for student teachers.” (P20)

Another challenge was on the making of the lesson plan as shared by participant 4.

“Sa paghimu sa LP (lesson plan) kay challenge na jud kaayo kay lisud! Kay ang SPED wala jud sa Teaching of ... sa uban nga subjects” (P4)

(The making of lesson plan was very challenging because in SPED we didn’t have Teaching of... to other subjects)

Theme 3: “Four P’s: Pray, Prepare the lessons, Practice and Positive mindset”

Just like fears and traumas in life, there are challenges that one faces in student teaching. How one is able to overcome the problems, trains one to become a stronger and wiser educator. Thorndike (Gandhi, 2010) stresses the need to prepare oneself cognitively and physically as stipulated in the *Law of Readiness*. Individuals learn best when they are ready to learn, and they will not learn much if they see no reason for learning. Also, he emphasizes the importance of repetition as discussed in his *Law of Exercise*. The mind can rarely recall new concepts or practices after a single exposure, but every time it is practiced, learning continues and is re-enforced. Thus, the participants thought that the best way to overcome all the challenges being thrown to them was to pray, prepare the lessons, practice and have a positive mindset.

“Nag pray lang jud ko, nya akong gi-set sa akong mind nga wa ko’y problema. Makaya ra nako tanan with God’s help. Morally, spiritually, tanan nalang –ly sa end, gihatag sa ako parents.” (P1)

(I just prayed then set my mind that I will have no problem, that I can do it all with God’s help. Morally, spiritually, all of those –ly were given by my parents)

One way of coping with those challenges was to prepare oneself and be optimistic. As shared by participant 15:

“Through the experiences of the former ST’s and adjustments- you are the only one who can help yourself to move forward. Be optimistic!” (P15)

Theme 4: “Classroom CEO”

“I give you that responsibility because I know that you will do an outstanding job.” This is a statement by a famous speaker and educator in the United States, Ron Clark (Kritzer, 2012). Being a student that would eventually

metamorphose to being a teacher means undergoing a lot of adjustments, personally and professionally. Handling a class is a tough job. One needs to think of everything from the least important things to the most important ones. That is why, one does not only act as a teacher but also a manager for one to be able to adjust to different situations in the field. The primary adjustments made by the participants were concerned more on the management of time and attitude towards the teaching profession, students, co-student teachers and mentors.

Time management was the major adjustment that the participants made. This was affirmed by participants 15 and 18.

“Top on my list is the adjustments in managing my time. In making lesson plans and making of instructional materials.” Also, adjustments regarding the attitudes and personalities among co-ST’s.” (P15)

“TIME. I adjusted my time. Lahi naman gud if ST ka, if naa kay i- handle nga class. Dapat time conscious naku.” (P18)

(TIME. I adjusted my time. It’s different when you’re an ST, if you’ll handle a class you should be time conscious)

Other participants also agreed that time was not the only factor that they had to manage. They also had to adjust their own attitudes towards their students, mentors and themselves. As revealed by a participant:

“ One is the adjustment in attitude in front of my students. When situation calls for me to be strict then I have to act like I am superior to them for them to listen and follow my instructions. I also have to adjust my schedule for me to be able to be on time in submitting the lesson plan (LP) and demo teaching.” (P22)

“ Schedule!! Very early ma-abot unya very dugay ma-uli. Attitude, sometimes very negative ko!” (P12)

(Schedule!! You arrive very early and go home very late. Attitudes, I’m very negative sometimes!)

Theme 5 : “A Blessing in Disguise”

Student teaching is the highlight of the college years of education students. It is a culminating activity (Pogoy and Montalbo, 2010) wherein the teacher education institution provides the pre service teachers the opportunity to teach into a professional classroom practice. The aim of the teacher education institution is not merely of preparing the best teachers they can have but also to adapt the new teacher education innovations in a complex, rapidly changing world. Once we undergo such experience, it is then that we can define what it truly means. Thus, the participants define it as,

“ It is like hitting two birds with a stone. It was beneficial because I get to be exposed to two different areas (special and regular classes).”(P7)

Participant 12 defined it as:

“ It’s like a symbolism of what life is. Every day you get to face problems from different students but what matters most is that you get to help them solve their problems whether academically or emotionally.” (P12)

Both participants 17 and 22 described the whole experience as a blessing.

“A blessing in disguise. Despite the hardships and challenges, I would still call it a blessing since it helped me grow as an individual and it gave me an idea on how to handle a regular class” (P17)

“Student teaching for me in a regular class is a blessing. Dako jud siya ug natabang nga na boost jud akong confidence when it comes to teaching.” (P22)

(Student teaching for me in a regular class is a blessing. It helped me boost my confidence when it comes to teaching)

Theme 6 : “Half-Baked Teachers”

A major emphasis on preparing future teachers is incorporated in the education curriculum. A key principle in curriculum design is the need for a curriculum to be coherent (Darling-Hammond & Branford in Ozer, 2004). The curriculum should be aligned as to how well and to what extent a school or teacher has matched the content that students are actually taught with the academic expectations described in learning standards. As SPED undergraduate students, the participants felt that the curriculum was not adequate enough and not in line for them to teach regular students.

“No. I think the Gen. Ed people have more edge than us SPEDers because of their Teaching of Subjects” (P2)

Without a doubt, participant 12 said:

“Personally, I think that we are not half-baked - because there are still important subjects nga ma tackle sa second semester pa. Good thing if second sem mo practicum.” (P12)

The lack of proper and appropriate implementation of the curriculum was also mentioned. As stated:

“No, it’s not enough. It needs proper and appropriate implementation.” (P21)

Theme 7 : “Ready for Battle”

Based on Edward Thorndike’s Law of Readiness (Gandhi, 2010)), one learns only when he is physically and mentally ready for it. In other words, preparatory set on the part of the student is an important condition for learning. Like a soldier ready for battle, the participants prepared themselves in the different domains. Participant 7 prepared herself mentally. As shared:

“Prior to student teaching, I was already preparing myself in terms of exposing myself to regular students (Sunday school). I study my lessons and I do further researches for added info.” (P7)

Physical and financial preparations were also made by participant 2.

“Collect funds, save money and canvass kung asa ang mga barato nga materials and paphotocopyhan. Matulog whole day, if possible, inig Saturday nya inig Sunday sugod nasad sa trabaho. I try my best to manage my time.” (P2)

(Collect funds, save money and canvass where to buy less expensive materials and where to photocopy learning resources at a cheap cost. Sleep the whole day during Saturdays, if possible and work again on Sundays. I try my best to manage my time.)

Participant 17 and 12 agreed that spiritual preparation was essential too.

“I always pray and ask guidance from God.” (P17)

“Ora et labora (Pray and work)” (P12)

Theme 8: “Spirituality and power of the Mind”

What happens during a demonstration? How does one adjust when one faces a problem during a demonstration? Most of the participants found that the mind over matter thinking is the most effective way to adjust to such situations. According to Albert Bandura (in Ajuwon, 2012), a person’s attitudes, abilities, and cognitive skills play a major role in how we perceive situations and how we behave in response to different situations. The extent or strength of one’s belief in God and one’s own ability to complete tasks help one to achieve his or her goals. Believing in God, one’s self, having common sense and thinking positively helped the participants during their demonstration. As shared:

“I just believe in God and in myself. I pray before my demo...” (P6)

As for participant 15, the need to have common sense is a must.

“In every demo, you cannot predict what will happen next or you cannot expect one answer when you ask your students, and with that you really need adjustments. The best thing that I can do when I am having my demo is to simply have “common sense” and just be calm because the more nervous you are, the more you’ll be mentally blocked and because of that, more chances of being scolded by your mentor afterwards.” (P15)

According to participants 21, optimism helps one a lot.

“The only thing nga ako buhaton during demonstration is, still being a positive thinker. Sige ko’g think nga the result of my demonstration will be positive. Sige ko’g think nga my students can benefit from me. They can gain lots of learning which are useful to them.” (P22)

(The only thing that I do during demonstration is being a positive thinker. I always think positively about the results of my demonstration. I always think that my students will benefit from me. They can gain lots of learning which are useful to them.)

Intrinsic motivation was also emphasized by participant 20.

"I always tell myself: Do your best. This is your show. It rarely happens that you own the stage...and everything else follows." (P20)

8. CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study distilled the essence of what it is like to be a SPED student teacher teaching in a non-SPED classroom. It is like being thrown to a "straining training" without sufficient and adequate curricular support. One just has to "learn to swim by swimming" especially the adjusting to a regular class in terms of handling the students, preparing the lesson at times having 'terror' mentors, stressful and tiring, spending many sleepless nights preparing for the next day's lessons. They realized that one is not only a teacher but a classroom Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who needs to think, plan for everything - from the little details to the most important ones - then deciding how best to manage the class, the time, activities, thinking of many things from the less important to the most important and implement. The participants confronted these challenges with the four (4) P's: Pray, Prepare the lessons, practice and positive mindset. In the end, many view the meaning of the experience as a 'blessing in disguise' for it is a big help to grow as individuals, and like hitting two bird with one stone - get exposed to the special as well as the regular class, to their advantage.

They also think, based on their experiences, that their curriculum was not adequate and sufficient enough to prepare them to be in a regular classroom setting. But despite the hardships and challenges, they still call it a 'blessing in disguise' since it helped them to grow and mature as individual persons and gave them the idea on how to handle a regular class. Truly, SPED student teachers have more edge in teaching since they are now trained and exposed to teaching both SPED and non-SPED students. They developed their versatility in the process of dealing with students in both regular and special classrooms

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers would like to recommend to the school management and supervisors that whenever feasible, SPED student teachers have longer exposure to SPED classrooms since their curriculum is really geared towards a SPED classroom setting. However, due to exigencies of service and the changing demand of the time, the SPED students can also be prepared, given orientation and pep talks on the need to be more open and flexible to rise to the challenge, whenever assigned to a regular classroom. For this experience to be smoother and not create unnecessary anxiety and stress on the part of the student teachers, a strengthening of the present SPED curriculum may be considered. The inclusion of the how's and what's of teaching of different subjects, similar to those courses of education students taking Bachelor in Elementary Education major in General education may be integrated to better prepare the SPED students to the challenges of real life *for to be forewarned is to be forearmed.*

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