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Navigating challenges and implementing strategies: Teachers teaching deaf students in a higher education institution

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Abstract

Many institutions worldwide have advocated inclusive education through international and local legal bases. However, higher education needs more advancement since many students with special needs do not proceed to higher education. Hence, many teachers need to be trained to accommodate them, making handling such cases difficult. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the challenges in handling deaf students and their strategies to address them. This study is anchored in the theoretical framework of Oliver's (1990) disability theory. The study revealed that the challenges of handling deaf students are communication barriers, technical issues, and teaching and accommodation difficulties. Their strategies are presentation accommodations, response accommodations, timing and scheduling accommodations, modification, and patience and understanding. Therefore, an action plan should be implemented to improve inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, deaf students, inclusive teachers, higher education institution

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are expected to nurture students in an inclusive environment for all types of students, including students with special needs because they are mandated to provide inclusive education for all. Baharuddin, Linusi, and Amin (2022) ^[2] claimed that children are diverse and have their own uniqueness, including students with special needs; hence, every child has individual needs and the right education they need. While inclusive education has been advocated by many schools to accommodate diverse learning needs, advancing inclusive education in higher education has been challenging, especially in handling deaf students. Hence, facing multilayered challenges can compel teachers to navigate effective strategies to address these challenges. Gam (2018) ^[6] argued that learning difficulty is often not prioritized because of the lack of assessment tools. It is a challenge for teachers to know how to help their students with special needs learn.

Special Education (SPED) in the Philippines and its integration into the global education agenda has been advocated. Hence, it is necessary to acquaint teachers with comprehensive special needs education and professional development programs. However, functional implementation persists as a challenge despite policies advancing for inclusive education. Teachers and administrators are regarded as pivotal for successful inclusion, as they play crucial roles in integrating students with disabilities into regular classes. However, this integration necessitates improved awareness and attitudes toward inclusive education among educators (Dalonos; Allam & Martin, 2021) ^[1]. Moreover, an increasing number of students with special needs are enrolling in higher education (Sefotho & Onyishi, 2021) ^[15]. International, inclusive education and disability legislation are progressing to advance more opportunities for students with special needs to complete higher education (Sefotho & Onyishi, 2021) ^[15]. Hence, teachers in higher education institutions are required to be equipped with strategies for handling students with special needs to accommodate them with proper services.

In Indonesia, the study of Baharuddin, Linusi, and Amin (2022) ^[2] about the problems and challenges English teachers face in teaching students with disabilities revealed that not all teachers handling children with special needs have sufficient knowledge in teaching basic literacy skills. Moreover, teachers find it challenging to find proper learning programs and media to aid children with unique abilities. Hence, teachers strategize to implement adaptive

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learning programs, providing supporting facilities, using differentiated learning, teaching pre-academic abilities, and learning with nature and all the senses in the teachable moment. In the Philippines, the study of Allam and Martin (2021) ^[1] about the teachers' perspectives regarding issues and challenges in special education uncovered that most teachers teaching children with learning disabilities did not experience any special needs education training from the school. They perceived that they were not qualified to handle the children with learning disability.

Based on the aforementioned literature and studies, it is challenging for teachers to handle students with special needs in higher education. Primarily, these challenges occur because teachers are not well-trained and equipped to handle diverse students, including those with special needs. Therefore, this paper intends to explore the challenges teachers face in handling students with special needs and their strategies to address such challenges. This study provides significant insights into providing programs and training to help teachers in higher education be equipped with knowledge and strategies to accommodate students with special needs and advance inclusive education.

2. Materials and Methods

This study used qualitative research, particularly narrative research, to determine teachers' challenges and strategies in handling deaf students in a higher education institution. Narrative research is a qualitative method that is used in humanities and social sciences that investigates the lives of individuals or groups and provides narratives that can be used for research. This study is anchored in the theoretical framework of Oliver (1990, as cited in Mulvany, 2000), which explained that the difficulties and exclusion of people who are physically disabled and find themselves segregated from typical social activities and events, often because of a lack of accessibility or inclusion in the mainstream society that is not willing to adjust for these individuals. This study was conducted in one of the higher education institutions in Davao City, Philippines, where 42 teachers participated, handling a section with diverse students, including deaf students. Hence, the study used a purposive sampling technique. The data was gathered through a researcher-constructed in-depth interview guide that generates data such as life stories, accounts, narratives, and responses from the research participants through the questions indicated in the interview guide. This study adhered to the appropriate data-gathering procedures and ethical standards in conducting a research study by asking for permission from the school administration and consent from the participants. Moreover, the data-gathering procedure was conducted through written interviews. This study satisfied the validity test of the research instrument to establish its logic, soundness, truthfulness, and consistency. The data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis and validated by experts in special education.

3. Results and Discussion

Inclusive education has been challenging to advance in higher education despite the many movements and implementations of special education in basic education. The challenges and strategies of teachers in handling deaf students are crucial in determining the actions that can be taken to advocate inclusive education and provide the necessary accommodations to cater to their diverse needs.

3.1 Challenges Encountered by Teachers in Handling Deaf Students

The analyses of the empirical data yielded three overarching themes on the notable challenges encountered by teachers in handling students with special needs. The following themes that were formulated based on the responses of the teachers are (1) Communication Barriers, (2) Technical Issues, and (3) Teaching and Accommodation Difficulties.

3.1.1 Communication Barriers

One of the difficulties of deaf education has been identified as communication. Any intentional or unintentional verbal or nonverbal conduct that is likely to impact the behavior, thoughts, or attitudes of a specific individual or people is referred to as communication (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021) ^[10]. Learners frequently employ nonverbal communication of deaf students, but effective communication requires the interpretation of word signs and body language. Teachers' use of an unfamiliar manner of communication has been proven in studies to affect the performance of deaf students in schools.

3.1.1.1. Sign Language Literacy

For deaf students, sign language is a lifeline for communication because of its visual aspect. Sign Language is a native language of the deaf community; however, it is not expected for a regular teacher to be literate in this type of visual-gestural modality. Poor literacy levels were cited as a result of poor sign language skills among teachers of deaf learners and the use of foreign sign language systems in special schools, particularly American Sign Language (ASL), which was alien to deaf students (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021) ^[10]. According to Nonde (2013, as cited in Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021) ^[10], deaf students felt uncomfortable with teachers' use of verbal communication, and lip-reading was only helpful for a few students.

3.1.1.2. Grammar Concerns

Incorrect grammar can render meaningless statements and ambiguous messages, leading to misunderstanding and misinterpretation with a communication partner. In teaching, proper grammar influences how a teacher successfully communicates their lessons and can grasp and comprehend their students easily. Despite that, teachers handling special needs, specifically deaf students, often find this challenging. Due to issues accessing and understanding syntactical and morphological structures, deaf students have difficulty writing English. According to Martin (2012, as cited in Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021) ^[10], auditory or visual errors at the sentence level are common, making comprehension and responding to standardized examination questions difficult.

3.1.2 Technical Issues

Although distance education has the potential to extend educational possibilities in both developed and developing countries, it has failed to owe to low quality, a lack of investment in academic institutions, and the use of traditional teaching methods by teaching staff. If distance education professors merely lecture and teach, this is not a guarantee of quality education but only a portion of the job. For students' motivation and success, especially online instructors must model high-quality teaching practices.

According to the findings of a recent study conducted during the pandemic period, remote education, which allows teachers to evaluate objectively, has also had a favorable impact on student progress thanks to novel learning approaches.

3.1.2.1 Internet Connectivity

Synchronous online learning takes the form of videoconferencing and other multimedia approaches. Perhaps the most significant operational benefit of online synchronous classes is their flexible, dispersed delivery, allowing teachers and students to participate in the learning process from any geographical area. Nevertheless, having a fast and stable internet connection was a challenge encountered by a teacher handling students with special needs, specifically deaf students. Inclusive education and online learning platforms are critical resources. However, according to Onyema *et al.* (2020) ^[12], one of the critical issues in online education is insufficient internet accessibility, which impedes students' education. According to UNESCO (2020, as cited in Onyema *et al.*, 2020) ^[12], one of the negative consequences of coronavirus school closures is unequal access to digital learning portals, such as a lack of technology or good internet connectivity.

3.1.3 Teaching and Accommodations Difficulties

The education of deaf students has been documented to be harmed by the use of incorrect teaching techniques and resources, as well as insufficiently qualified people. In various research studies, Ndonyo *et al.* (2017, as cited in Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021) ^[16, 10] found that teachers were utilizing unsuitable teaching approaches and that there were insufficient teaching materials for deaf students. According to the study by Mandyata and Kamukwamba (2018, as cited in Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021) ^[10], Teachers for deaf students were found to be underprepared. In contrast, Ndonyo *et al.* (2017, as cited in Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021) ^[16, 10] reported the use of unqualified teachers to teach deaf students as a contributing factor to their learning challenges.

3.1.3.1 Teaching Strategies

Special education guarantees that deaf students receive individualized instruction tailored to meet their specific learning requirements. Teaching students with special needs, specifically those deaf students necessitate strategies and accommodations to help these students bypass their vulnerabilities and perform to their full potential. However, because of the little to no background education and training in teaching these students, this posed a challenge encountered by teachers handling students with special needs. Many external and internal elements influence student learning processes. Abstract concepts are harder to comprehend for deaf students. They have difficulty communicating and comprehending the information given to them. As a result, it has an impact on the academic elements of students. They learn new things via their visual senses. Another problem is the teacher's still insufficient expertise, lack of imagination, and lack of innovation in the classroom. Most teachers do not believe deaf students can learn high-level courses.

3.1.3.2 Time Constraint

Accommodating deaf students may account for extending

more time and effort from a teacher. Knowing teachers' busy schedules and workload, this emerged as a challenge encountered by teachers handling students with special needs and a recognized sub-theme of teaching and accommodation difficulty. The most challenging issue in education today is providing a quality education for all students in an inclusive setting. Although the principle of inclusion has widespread support in society, there is less agreement on whether it can be implemented in practice. Providing proper care and education for disabled children in an inclusive setting is difficult. Each child presents a unique set of concerns to health and education specialists regarding physical, psychological, social, and educational issues.

3.2 Strategies of Teachers in Addressing the Challenges of Handling Deaf Students

The analysis of key informant discussions of teachers' collective encounters with challenges in dealing with deaf students led to the emergence of five overarching themes that include (1) Presentation Accommodations, (2) Response Accommodation, (3) Timing and Scheduling Accommodation, (4) Modification, and (5) Patience and Understanding.

3.2.1 Presentation Accommodations

According to Bengough (2014, as cited in Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021) ^[10], accommodation refers to the acceptance of learners in the classroom through the implementation of instructional methods that enable pupils to display standard grade-level expectations. Differentiated instruction can improve student academic performance in terms of high scores while also lowering the chance of school failure, which is common among students with special needs. Students must also show that what they have learned is appropriate for their academic level and interests (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021) ^[10], necessitating changing learning styles.

3.2.1.1 Provision of Modules

A self-learning module is particularly useful in both synchronous and asynchronous distance learning environments since it aids and supplements the presentation and implementation of the learning process, ensuring education accessibility amid the present crisis posed by the pandemic. Teachers handling students with special needs, particularly deaf students, provide electronic modular copies and printed modules as relevant learning material for these groups of students, addressing the challenge of teaching and accommodating these learners. Al-Bayati and Hussein (2009, as cited in Hashim, Tasir, & Mohamad, 2013) ^[7] investigated the impact of e-learning modules in tutorial classes on the motivation of deaf students to learn the topic. Seven experimental instructional e-lessons were created and tested, with positive results in increasing the motivation of deaf students.

3.2.1.2 Simple Gestures

Teachers handling students with special needs, particularly deaf students, were aware of the importance of sign language to enrich communication for these students. Hence, some of these teachers extend their accommodation services by learning simple gestures to address the challenges they encounter in terms of communication barriers. In contrast to verbal communication, which is

accomplished through the use of voice, manual communication refers to communication through the use of hands (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021)^[10]. Manual approaches include communication through visual stimuli such as sign language and finger signals. Because sign language is a visual-gestural language, it employs the hands, facial expressions, and body systematically to convey meaning (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021)^[10].

3.2.1.3 Written Instructions

Instructions done orally may be complicated for students with special needs, particularly deaf students. Teachers handling these students veered away from giving oral instructions and instead shifted to giving written instructions. This allowed the student to have a reference and better comprehend the directions, enabling them to follow along and understand where the course was going and what information was covered. Hence, teachers find this a significant way to address the challenges they encounter regarding communication barriers. In addition to audiology and special education, deaf students require speech and language services. Developing a particular curriculum to meet the unique needs of deaf students is critical. They suggest that special speech and language education, audiological rehabilitation, and instruction using visual and physical modalities may be required for this group of pupils.

3.2.1.6 Role of Class Mayors

The role of class mayors was paramount in helping teachers handling deaf students address the challenge of teaching and accommodating these students since they served as advocates for them and ensured monitoring. The role of mayors was an essential source of academic support for these students, filling in instructional gaps and giving additional instruction as needed. Deaf students must learn and play alongside their hearing counterparts as part of their social and educational intervention programs in order to understand and appreciate Deaf culture, deaf identity, and sign language because such interactions and educational interventions are likely to enhance collaboration and, as a result, the good academic performance of deaf students. Peer acceptance, social competence, and friendly relationships have all been proven to reflect different stages of development in students.

3.2.2 Response Accommodation

Response accommodation is a type of accommodation where students with special needs, particularly deaf students, can demonstrate their learning by completing instructional tasks, assignments, or evaluations in written methods. It is also important to note that response accommodation, just like other types of accommodations, does not change the learning expectations and does not lower the task objectives. According to Brett (2010, as cited in Hameed, 2020)^[58], understanding spoken information in academic settings for deaf students is not optimal, regardless of the use of hearing aids. As a result, note-takers have been identified as useful sources of assistance. Teachers struggle to provide suitable textual learning materials and lectures in light of this issue posed by deaf students. Note-takers are asked to write down the lecture's main points in traditional note format. Even taking notes allows deaf students to have a logical level of speech comprehension by allowing them to focus solely on the teacher's lecture without being distracted

by taking notes simultaneously.

3.2.3 Timing and Scheduling Accommodation

Similar to other accommodations, the timing and scheduling accommodations do not change the learning expectations and do not lower the task objectives. Time management and scheduling flexibility allow for adjustments in how time is allocated. Hence, giving students with special needs, particularly deaf students, more time to finish an assessment, assignment, or evaluation by dividing lengthy coursework into manageable segments or sections. This accommodation frequently lessens students' dissatisfaction and weariness, allowing them to access and exhibit their learning. In this context, delivering remediation services in the resource room aims to provide children with disabilities with more focused and individualized training are helpful.

3.2.4 Modification

Modification, as opposed to accommodations, changes the instructional objective, content, or performance standards for a specific task. Students with special needs, particularly deaf students, may need modifications in specific learning areas, which include goals to assist the student in recouping and developing toward the grade-level standard. Because most standardized tests provided to learners in inclusive settings are associated with standardized test forma, which is likely to cause challenges to deaf students, assessment accommodations enable them to be exposed to test contents without barriers. Assessments for deaf students, like those for other exceptional students, should be inclusive, recognizing that students have varying talents.

3.2.5 Patience and Understanding

Many characteristics constitute a teacher, and patience and understanding are one of them. When dealing with students with special needs, particularly deaf students, patience, and understanding were essential considering the students' condition. Suriá (2012, as cited in Pérez-Jorge *et al.*, 2021)^[13] believed that the way each teacher responds to the demands of their pupils becomes the most potent variable in determining the success of inclusion in educational centers. Solís, Pedrosa, and Mateos-Fernández (2019, as cited in Pérez-Jorge *et al.*, 2021)^[13] claimed that the success or failure of efforts to build and sustain inclusion would be influenced by the educational community's knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes about disability, which are determinants of the inclusive process' success or failure. Regarding attitudes, the success of an inclusive process is determined by the attitudes of the educational community in which it takes place.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, teachers are facing challenges in handling deaf students because of various factors related to the condition of the students, constraints in the current setup or new normal in education, and their respective tasks in a higher education institution. Teachers are the leading key players since they have the most contact with the students. Hence, their role in implementing inclusive education is essential. However, teachers handling students with special needs experience challenges for various reasons, and their teaching is mostly affected by them. It is also evident that various challenges come with varied strategies to overcome or address the challenges in

accommodating deaf students. All types of students, including deaf students, deserve to be accommodated to realize their potential and self-determination and become productive members of society. Therefore, teachers have the responsibility to advance and promote inclusive education. It is thought that integrating deaf students into the mainstream allows them to benefit from the excitement of mixing with comparably more able pupils and observing higher models of social and intellectual performance.

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