From Aspiration to Transformation: A Phenomenological Study of Special Needs Education Teachers in Handling Learners with Reading Difficulties

Abstract
Teachers foster positive education to an inclusive learning however, they often encounter complexities in teaching Special Needs Education Learners with reading difficulty (Alcayde, Basilan, 2024).This article aimed to explore the lived experiences of Special Needs Education teachers in addressing the learners with reading difficulties. This study was anchored in phenomenological research and was conducted within the province of South Cotabato, with only the identified teachers participating in this research. The participants shall be teachers from any of the municipalities in South Cotabato or from the City of Koronadal. With six (6) participants, we, the researchers, were able to pinpoint seven (7) themes (Differentiated Strategies, Understanding the Learners, Patience, Consistency, and Persistence, Challenges and Emotional Response, Communication and Collaboration, Reflection and Growth, Transformative Learning of Teachers).This study revealed that teacher training programs should include strategies for identifying individual learning difficulties and implementing differentiated interventions. We suggested to conduct ongoing research to explore effective strategies for supporting Special Needs Education teachers in managing the emotional demands of their profession and preventing burnout.
Keywords: experiences, special needs education reading difficulties, special needs education teachers, reading interventions, transformative learning

1. Introduction

Teachers foster positive education to an inclusive learning however, they often encounter complexities in teaching Special Needs Education Learners with reading difficulty (Alcayde, Basilan, 2024). Previous studies have explored that teachers have always adopted inclusive education; they still face different raising concerns when it comes to teaching reading (Wesley, 2020). It is not only present in adults with special needs yet also is very present at a very young age. This is supported by Adams (2024), that even at a young age, children with special needs are increasingly often left behind compared to their other peers when it comes to the skill of reading and is often the main alarming concern for Special Needs Education teachers to act as early as possible.

Teachers in Australia have felt this urgency as around 30-40% of children, regardless of condition, manifests the concerns for reading difficulty (Serry, Snow, MacCormack, 2022). It is also a concern as well in the United States, as 40% of students under the care of special education falls increasingly to the low levels of reading (Samuels, 2017). Even in Pakistan, special education teachers have also encountered various reading predicaments (Shah & Reman, 2023).

In the Philippines, this situation is deeply felt. A study has shown that many Special Needs Education teachers work hard every day, often dealing with learners with reading difficulties (Kilag, Uy, Dela Cerna, Doroy, Gomez, Riveral, Castanares, 2024). Significantly, Philippines is on the far bottom of

the list among economies when it comes to reading and one way to grasp the situation is to determine the ability and the capacity of teachers as well as their needs and skills in teaching reading (Bautista, 2023).

As furthered by Kilag, Torres, & Mira (2025) a significance on the limitation to conduct research speaks scarcity of research on how special education teachers handle learners with special needs, particularly those with reading difficulties. In Koronadal City, a study emphasizes the need to further dive into more cstudies to understand better Special Needs Education on both students and teachers (Cansing, 2018). Their experiences show that while the challenges are great, the need to act is even greater as supported by Kilag, Uy, Dela Cerna, Doroy, Gomez, Riveral, Castanares (2024), understanding the world of Special Education Teachers is important and crucial for the benefit of both the teachers and the students as well.

This study held great value for many of us involved in the teaching and learning process. As Special Needs Education teachers, the findings helped better understand and improve the support for learners with reading difficulties. For fellow reading teachers, the insights helped reflect on current methods. District supervisors would reflect on the bigger picture and lead efforts to enhance programs that aimed to reduce the number of struggling readers. Most importantly, our learners, as this research aimed to find better ways to support their progress. It also helped parents and guardians understand their children and how they can be more involved in helping them at home. Lastly, for those who wish to explore this topic further, this study served as a meaningful reference to inspire future research and continued advocacy for inclusive education.

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Special Needs Education teachers in addressing the reading difficulty of Special Needs Education learners, as well as the teachers' development, implementation, and reflection on their intervention programs in reading. The study was anchored on the assumption that each Special Needs Education teacher experiences reading difficulties differently. Their realities were shaped by their daily work with learners, making each perspective unique and meaningful. Thus, we, the researchers, assumed that the participants of the study would be reliable sources of information to make this study successful. Lastly, we assumed that our study is timely and relevant, which will supply a basis of knowledge to answer the presented research questions.

Experiential Learning Theory by David Kolb (1984) guided this study, as it reflected how we, as teachers, truly learned through experience. Kolb's four stages: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation mirror the way we continuously grow in our profession. This theory supported the heart of our study, which valued our lived experiences in the classroom as meaningful and valid sources of learning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this lens, we see ourselves as reflective practitioners, always learning from the challenges and successes we encounter every day.
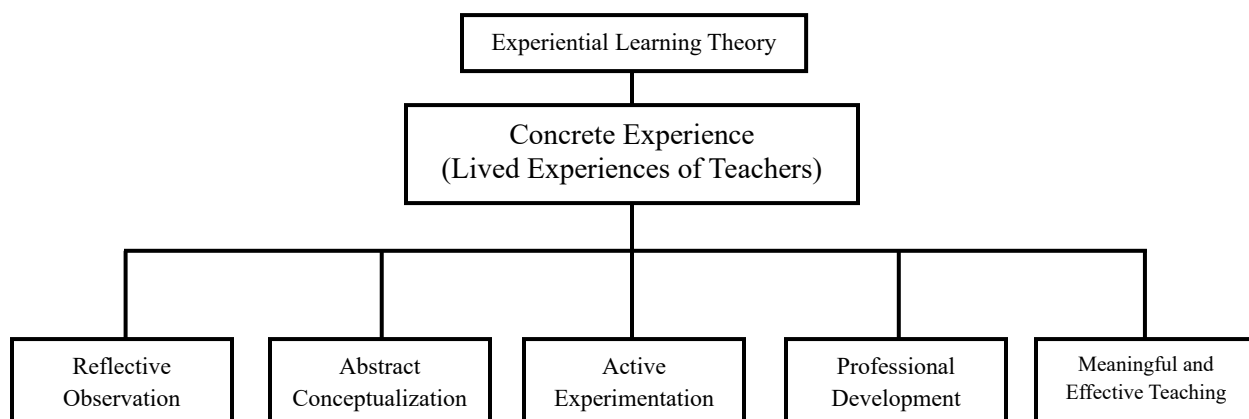

Figure 1. Research Paradigm on the Intervention of Teachers on Special Needs Education Students' Reading Difficulty

2. Method

This study was anchored in phenomenological research, that primarily unravels the understanding of how people experience the world in their everyday lives. Through this approach, we gained rich, detailed stories that revealed the true essence and the realities of what people experienced and how they understood their realities in their own worlds.

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of high school Special Needs Education teachers in providing interventions among Special Needs Education learners who have difficulty in reading. The study was conducted within the province of South Cotabato, with only the identified teachers for their participation in this research. The participants are teachers from any of the municipalities in South Cotabato or from the City of Koronadal.

The recommended number of participants typically ranges from five (5) to ten (10) individuals (Creswell, 2013). However, in this study, we will only involve six (6) Special Needs Education teachers. Purposive sampling and through the inclusion criteria of this study, the participants were carefully chosen based on their experience in handling reading interventions, their willingness to share their stories, and their active involvement in inclusive or special education settings.

The study aimed for high school teachers as our participants of our chosen topic. It was ensured that the selected participants must have a minimum of one-year experience of being a special needs education teacher or as a Special Needs Education receiving high school teacher, within the province of South Cotabato or the City of Koronadal. Aside from this, he or she must handle Special Needs Education learners who have reading difficulties. Moreover, the participants must be directly involved in the development, implementation, and reflection of the reading difficulty intervention programs of the school or department. With this, the participants and their shared accounts and experiences are reassured with utmost confidentiality and privacy.

IDI or In-Depth Interview was used in the study, to talk, ask, and just purely unravel the deep personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings about a particular topic of the people (Creswell, J. W., 2013). The collection of data was done within May 2025. For the collection stage, a letter was sent to the participants through email or messenger. Given that the teachers are no longer available at school due to valid reasons, we arranged a video conference to conduct the interviews. To accommodate the participants properly, we initiated a monetary help for the internet, we provided the participants a small amount to cover the expenses for the interview and to made sure that the participants will not be anxious about the source of internet as the data and load credit amount was taken care of us. Then, we carefully prepared open-ended questions that allowed the participants to share their personal experiences with addressing reading difficulties. We made sure that the open-ended questions are to direct well the participants into the deep and profound exploration on their experiences with regard to teaching special needs education learners with reading difficulty. We also made sure to obtain written consent from each participant and they have also known that they can choose to step away from the study at any point without any pressure or negative consequences. For the interview, the participants were aware that we would take notes and record the session. The interview was followed thoroughly by staying on the outline. After the interview, we made a comparison to the gathered notes and the captured recording.

In our study, we primarily used Colaizzi's method of data analysis to establish a well thorough, authentic and credible view and understanding of the experiences of the teachers. The seven-step process of Collaizi method, paved a way for the natural transcribing, extracting and identifying of the participants' statements, that led to the creation and formulation of statements of the participants (Wirihana, Welch, & Williamson, 2018).

The participants in this study were teachers, so, we were aware that they shared their personal accounts on this research topic. Hence, we asked them about their personal experiences and interactions with Special Needs Education learners. The understanding of the ethical considerations given to the sensitivity of the nature of the research; confidentiality was a top priority throughout the conduct of the research process.

3. Results
Modified Paradigm

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                        │   Experiential Learning Theory  │
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        │       Concrete Experience         │──────│   Differentiated Strategies  │
        │  (Lived Experiences of Teachers)  │      └──────────────────────────────┘
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                                                    ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                                                    │ Aligning Activities and      │
                                                    │ Intervention                 │
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                                                    │ Multi-Sensory and Varied     │
                                                    │ Approaches                   │
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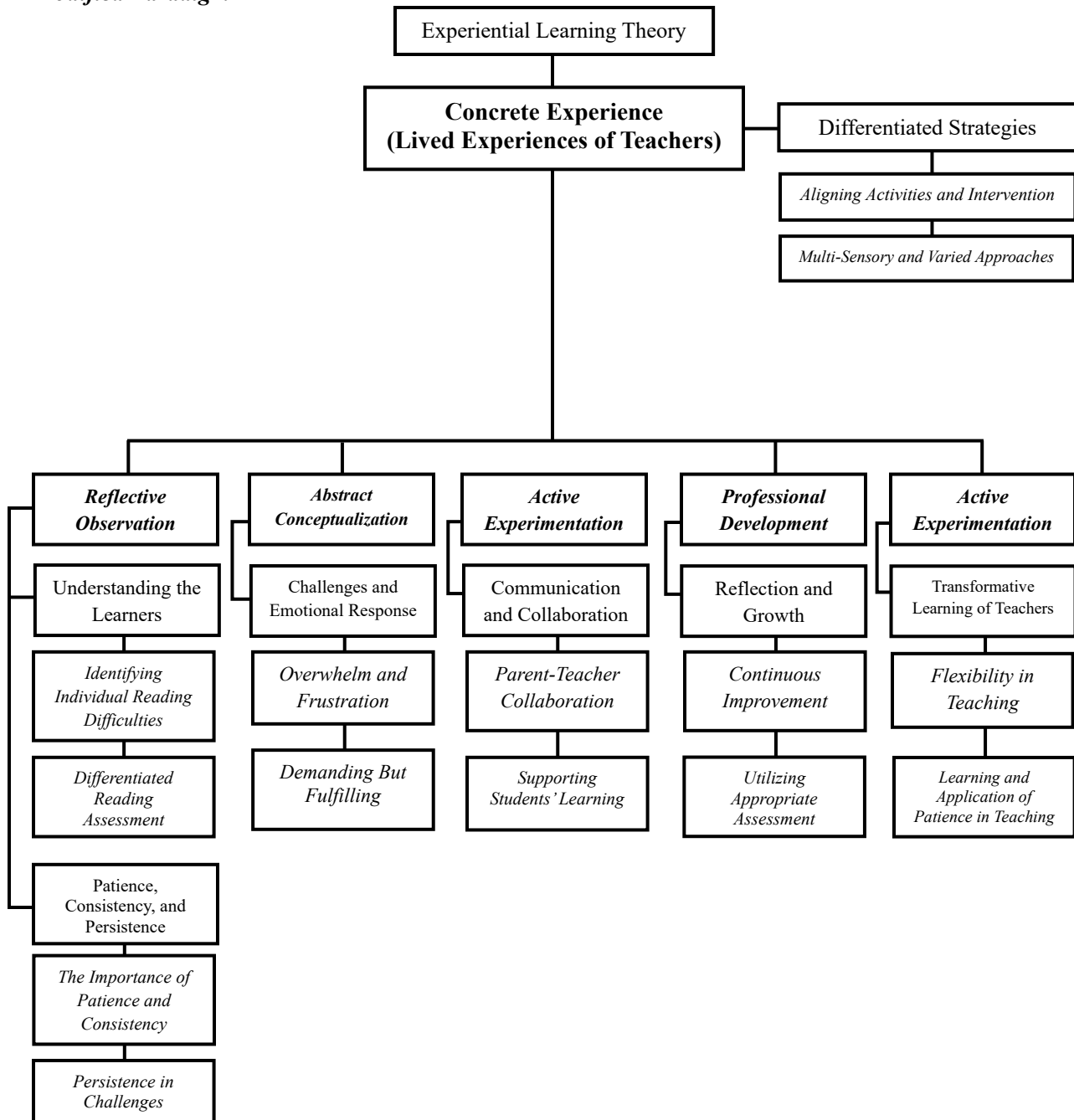| *Reflective Observation*	*Abstract Conceptualization*	*Active Experimentation*	*Professional Development*	*Active Experimentation*
Understanding the Learners	Challenges and Emotional Response	Communication and Collaboration	Reflection and Growth	Transformative Learning of Teachers
Identifying Individual Reading Difficulties	*Overwhelm and Frustration*	*Parent-Teacher Collaboration*	*Continuous Improvement*	*Flexibility in Teaching*
Differentiated Reading Assessment	*Demanding But Fulfilling*	*Supporting Students' Learning*	*Utilizing Appropriate Assessment*	*Learning and Application of Patience in Teaching*
Patience, Consistency, and Persistence				
The Importance of Patience and Consistency				
Persistence in Challenges				

Figure 2. Modified Research Paradigm on the Intervention of Teachers on Special Needs Education Students' Reading Difficulty

Table 1: Emerging Themes and Sub-Themes

Major Themes	Sub-Themes
Differentiated Strategies	Aligning Activities and Intervention
	Multi-Sensory and Varied Approaches
Understanding the Learners	Identifying Individual Reading Difficulties
	Differentiated Reading Assessment
Patience, Consistency, and Persistence	The Importance of Patience and Consistency
	Persistence in Challenges
Challenges and Emotional Response	Overwhelm and Frustration
	Demanding but Fulfilling
Communication and Collaboration	Parent-Teacher Collaboration
	Supporting Students' Learning
Reflection and Growth	Continuous Improvement
	Utilizing Appropriate Assessment
Transformative Learning for Teachers	Flexibility in Teaching
	Learning and Application of Patience in Teaching

Table 1 presents the emerged major themes as results from the conducted study. The major themes are Differentiated Strategies, Understanding the Learners, Patience, Consistency, and Persistence, Challenges and Emotional Response, Communication and Collaboration, Reflection and Growth, and Transformative Learning for Teachers.

Major Theme 1: Differentiated Strategies

Under the first major theme are the sub-themes: Aligning Activities and Intervention and Multi-Sensory and Varied Approaches. Stated below are the participants' statements in relation with the themes.

Aligning Activities and Intervention

"I create simple activities that match their level and interests to keep them engaged. – Participant 4

"I adjust my interventions based on what each child needs". – Participant 3

"Over time, I've learned not to rely on just one method. I've become more flexible, trying different techniques and tools based on each student's needs…" – Participant 2

Multi-Sensory and Varied Approaches

"We have individualized, we have the multi-sensory, we can [use] phonics instructions, like visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, like the songs, trance, and everything, matching pictures…" – Participant 6

"I use different multi-sensory materials, depending on the specific needs of the learners…"– Participant 5

"I always tailor the appropriate approaches for their individual needs…" – Participant 1

Major Theme 2: Understanding the Learners

Presented below are the sub-themes (Identifying Individual Reading Difficulties and Differentiated Reading Assessment) and statements related with the second major theme.

Identifying Individual Reading Difficulties

"It starts with identifying where the student is struggling… whether it's letter recognition, sounds, or comprehension…"– Participant 2

"… understand and learn the needs of the learners… understand their needs and learn what theirs needs are…" – Participant 1

Differentiated Reading Assessment

"I start by closely observing the student during class and one-on-one sessions to understand their unique difficulties. I also use simple assessment tools…"– Participant 1

"… we usually use tools. Of course, because they have special needs, their tools are specified for them. Such as simple phonetics, simple sight words, or with

syllables, tools are used to assess the students as well as their needs…" – Participant 2

Major Theme 3: Patience, Consistency, and Persistence

Under the third major theme are the sub-themes: The Importance of Patience and Consistency and Persistence in Challenges. Stated below are the statements in relation with the mentioned themes.

The Importance of Patience and Consistency

"It (reading) can be really challenging sometimes, especially when progress feels so slow. But I try to stay patient and remind myself that each learner has her own pace…"– Participant 3

"After the class, what I do is I am consistent in giving daily sessions to the student…" – Participant 4

Persistence in Challenges

"If the interventions are not effective for these learners, so I think you need to modify the information and details indicated in the individualized educational plans." – Participant 4

"I really need to change the intervention because maybe that is not the specific way of the child's learning style, the strategy is inappropriate..". – Participant 6

Major Theme 4: Challenges and Emotional Response

The fourth major theme has two sub-themes which are Overwhelm and Frustration and Demanding but Fulfilling. Below are the statements that support the major themes along its sub-themes.

Overwhelm and Frustration

"… it can feel overwhelming at times because every student's needs are unique and sometimes progress is very slow…"– Participant 2

"… the students…as diverse as they are, especially in special needs education…it feels overwhelming, and I also feel challenged…"
– Participant 6

Demanding but Fulfilling

"Of course, if you get to help them to read, it is a big achievement for you as a teacher, that even if they have special needs, still you have helped them read. It should be an achievement, not a challenge anymore…" – Participant 5

"I think we can say that it is not that easy…because they have different difficulties. I think the challenge here is demanding but fulfilling work also for us…"– Participant 6

Major Theme 5: Communication and Collaboration

As the fifth major theme emerged, two sub-themes have branched out: Parent-Teacher Collaboration and Supporting Students' Learning, which are supported by the following statements.

Parent-Teacher Collaboration

"So if you already identified their reading level, you will also identify their needs. In that way, there can be collaboration with the parents…"– Participant 6

"I see to it that I acknowledge the role of the parents…I keep in touch with them to update them of the student's learning progress…" – Participant 3

Supporting Students' Learning

"…I spend extra time working with them individually …their family so they can support learning at home…" – Participant 4

"…there can be collaboration with … the school head, and other colleagues, to address the learning needs of the students, specifically when creating or developing the students' IEP…" – Participant 6

"[I]…seek advice from experienced colleagues, and focus on building a trusting relationship with the students…" – Participant 2

"Sometimes, I also refer to their IEP or ask help from co-teachers to choose the best strategy…" – Participant 3

Major Theme 6: Reflection and Growth

The major theme Reflection and Growth has two sub-themes, which are Continuous Improvement and Utilization of Proper Assessment. These are backed up by the participants' statements below.

Continuous Improvement

"But with time, when it comes to experience and deeper understanding of my students' diverse needs, I learned that reading intervention must be highly individualized and purposefully designed… – Participant 6

"In this part, this is the self-reflection. Self-reflection on how I address learners' needs, and in a way, to know how to address their learning needs. Go back to their individual needs…" – Participant 1

"As time pass, I came to notice how each student helped me, as well as a teacher… In a way that, I 2noticed my growth in teaching, especially when it comes to widening my understanding when it comes to teaching my students… – Participant 4

"…because every student gives me an opportunity to be a better teacher…) – Participant 1

Utilization of Appropriate Assessment

"… very important to have appropriate assessment with these learners. Where are they in their learning level, in decoding ability and comprehension, we should also know about their learning styles, and very important to take note of their behavioral cues …" – Participant 6

"…go back to their assessment, their diagnosis kung meron silang results sa mga reading tools," (…go back to their assessment, their diagnosis, if they have the results from the reading tools …) *– Participant 1*

"It is important to have the correct… proper assessment for our learners, because the assessment serves as a guide on how to teach them depending on their specific needs…eventually it will help us teachers on teaching them well and effectively…" – Participant 2

Major Theme 7: Transformative Learning of Teachers

For the last major theme, two sub-themes also emerged: Flexibility in teaching and Learning and Application of Patience in Teaching. Presented below are the statements of the significant to the theme and sub-themes.

Flexibility in Teaching

"If your interventions with these learners are not effective, I think you need to modify those that you have indicated in the individualized educational plans." – Participant 6

"I really need to change the intervention because maybe that is not the student's way of learning, my strategies are inappropriate and I cannot cater the needs… really need to search sa internet I need to ask my co-teachers about the reading difficulties." – Participant 4

"I try to be flexible with my teaching methods, seek advice from experienced colleagues, and focus on building a trusting relationship with the students" – Participant 2

Learning and Application of Patience in Teaching

"It showed me the importance of … patience in teaching SNED learners…" – Participant 2

"… It reminded me that progress might be slow, but it's still progress…" – Participant 3

> *"It's really about being consistent, patient, and working together to help them improve little by little". – Participant 5*

Reflecting on the role of the researcher in this study, several aspects have been concluded. First is the importance of listening empathetically. Creating a safe space for the participants is the most crucial part of gathering data, for the participants to share their experiences in their most authentic form. The participants not only shared their strategies and experiences, but also the challenges and hardships they experienced in their field of work. Additionally, while doing thematic analysis, we emphasized the similarity of the experiences of the participants, but also gave justice to the uniqueness of their experiences. Moreover, qualitative research is highly interpretative. It is not simply gathering data, but making sense of the data gathered, making connections between responses, and creating a reasonable narrative.

4. Discussion

In the first Theme (Differentiated Strategies), suggests reading intervention strategies that address students with reading difficulties must be highly contextualized and appropriate, ensuring that they directly respond to learners' individual needs (Taboer & Rochyadi, 2024). Research constantly reveals that a one-size-fits-all approach to reading strategy is not enough for students with varied difficulties, as these students benefit more from diverse and individualized learning strategy (Daniel et al., 2023).

The second Theme (Understanding the Learners) entails that difficulties in reading should be identified early, specifically, as it allows a "custom-made" educational intervention and enhances the quality of education. Early identification of reading difficulties allows interventions that can prevent stagnation or regression of a child's reading ability (Shen & Goodrich, 2024). Research by Asri et al. (2022) showed that the implementation of an individualized plan allows an appropriate strategy that caters to specific learning ability.

In the third Theme (Patience, Consistency, and Persistence) supported by the Council of Ontario Universities (2017) mentioned that some learners with learning disabilities are a little longer in understanding and responding, which requires a lot of patience to be exercised. In line with this, consistency should also be partnered with the value of patience. According to Paller & Quirap (2024), the resilience and self-efficacy of teachers have important roles in effectively facing and solving challenges in learning and its effect on the learning outcomes of the students.

The fourth Theme (Patience, Consistency and Persistence) states that Special education teachers frequently manage high levels of disruptive behavior from students, which can lead to considerable emotional and psychological strain (Amstad & Müller, 2020; Brink et al., 2024). This indicates that teachers in special education often derive significant job satisfaction from their interactions with students, particularly when they observe tangible advancements in their students' abilities and social skills (Otrębski, 2022; Alkayed et al., 2024).

In the fifth Theme (Communication and Collaboration), entails that from the preparation and development, to the implementation, up until the post-assessment of the effectivity of leaners' Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), teachers, school head, and the parents have strong ties and communication to go about the educational plan of the learners. According to Nimet BulbinSucuoğlu & Bakkaloğlu (2018) as cited by Luna & Del Valle (2023), this parent-teacher relationship aims to work collaboratively to support the development of the learners and build the skills of the learners, which they can use in facing life.

The sixth Theme (Reflection and Growth) construes that teachers self-reflect and constantly modify their teaching methods and interventions based on the experiences and feedback of the students. Understanding student diversity helps foster tolerance among students, creating a conducive learning environment where differences are respected and utilized for collaborative learning (Putri et al., 2021). Concluded in the study of Nurai & Gulsara (2023), assessments do not only determine the amount of teaching attention given to students, but these also serve as effective tools for identifying the loopholes in the education system, particularly in the curriculum, supporting teachers' professional growth, and constructing a conducive educational environment.

In the seventh Theme (Transformative Learning of Teachers), as Block (2020) explained the impact of teachers' learning from their students. Regular interactions, discussions, and observation can cause shifts

in a teacher's understanding of the learners, curriculum, and classroom dynamics. Block (2020) also emphasized that learning from students provides a path for teachers to deepen their practice, evaluate themselves, and further explore the world of teaching and learning. Moreover, highlighted by Augusta University, in teaching students with all types of challenges and difficulties, patience must be heavily practiced.

The study focuses on the importance of understanding the individual needs of students with special needs and how teachers adapt their strategies. Future directions for potential researches could expand on these findings by developing more comprehensive theoretical frameworks for differentiated instruction and assessment in reading in special education settings.

The findings suggest that teacher training programs should include strategies for identifying individual learning difficulties and implementing differentiated interventions, especially for reading as it is a foundational skill. Future policies and actions could focus on integrating such training into teacher education curricula.

To deal with the challenges of this study, future researches could investigate the long-term impact of the reading interventions utilized by Special Needs Education teachers on the learners' academic and social profiles. Moreover, there is also need for ongoing research to explore effective strategies for supporting Special Needs Education teachers in managing the emotional demands of their profession and preventing burnout. Finally, this study calls for action researches that focus on the development and evaluation of programs that aim to enhancing parent-teacher collaboration and provide resources and support for families of students with special needs.

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