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Teachers' Experiences in Teaching Social and Adaptive Skills to Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

This study explored special education teachers' experiences in teaching social and adaptive skills to children with disabilities, focusing on curriculum integration, instructional challenges, effective teaching strategies, and implications for practice. Employing a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study involved five special education teachers purposively selected from Talisay City Central Elementary School, Cebu, Philippines, during the school year 2024–2025. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using a researcher-developed questionnaire and analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that teachers integrated social and adaptive skills through structured classroom routines, practical daily living activities in health lessons, and participation in school-wide social events. Major challenges included limited specialized training, inadequate special education materials and equipment, and insufficient parental involvement in reinforcing skills at home. Teachers identified the Picture Exchange Communication System, cooperative learning through peer pairing, and real-life simulations as effective instructional strategies. These experiences highlight the importance of connecting classroom instruction with everyday activities while ensuring that teachers and families have the necessary support needed to reinforce skills across different learning environments. The study concluded that developing social and adaptive competencies requires structured instruction, appropriate resources, and sustained home-school collaboration. It recommends targeted professional development, improved instructional resources, and strengthened parental engagement to support functional independence and social participation. Although limited to five teachers from one school, the findings provide context-specific insights into inclusive instructional practices. Aligned with Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 10, the study contributes to educational sustainability by informing inclusive curriculum development, institutional support, and equitable learning opportunities for children with disabilities.

Keywords: Adaptive Skills, Children with Disabilities, Inclusive Education, Phenomenological Research, Social Skills, Special Education Teachers, Teaching Strategies

1. Introduction

Social and adaptive skills are fundamental competencies that enable children with disabilities to function independently and participate in everyday activities. These include communication, self-care, mobility,

interpersonal interaction, problem-solving, and appropriate behavioral responses. Developing these abilities is essential because functional independence and social participation are important outcomes of inclusive education. Bindu and Saravanakumar (2023) emphasized that social and adaptive skills instruction complements academic learning by preparing learners to manage practical situations and participate meaningfully in their communities. Special education teachers are responsible for integrating these competencies into classroom instruction through individualized learning activities, structured routines, and practical experiences. Effective integration requires instructional approaches responsive to learners' developmental needs and abilities. However, differences in teacher preparation, instructional materials, and institutional support may affect the consistency and effectiveness of social and adaptive skills instruction.

Existing literature emphasizes the importance of individualized interventions, structured learning environments, and practical instructional strategies in developing social and adaptive skills among children with disabilities. Iftikhar et al. (2024) examined speech therapists' perspectives on evidence-based communication practices for children with autism spectrum disorder, while Elbeltagi et al. (2023) emphasized the contribution of structured play-based interventions to adaptive behavior development. Hakobyan and Harutyunyan (2021) identified visual supports and consistent routines as useful approaches for strengthening self-care competencies. Similarly, Michalopoulou (2023) demonstrated the value of peer-mediated interventions in promoting social interaction, while Vembye et al. (2024) examined collaborative teaching models that support adaptive learning. Research also identifies teacher competence, family participation, and instructional resources as important conditions for effective implementation. Mahmood et al. (2025) emphasized inadequate resources and professional preparation as barriers to inclusive instruction, whereas Antala et al. (2022) examined physical education teachers' self-efficacy and attitudes toward including pupils with disabilities. Øzerk et al. (2021) highlighted parental involvement in reinforcing social competencies, while Klimaitis and Mullen (2021) examined access to STEM education and barriers faced by students with disabilities and female students. Khasawneh (2024) underscored the need for appropriate assessment approaches in monitoring adaptive skills development. Other studies support differentiated instruction, assistive technology, and collaborative learning environments. Klavina et al. (2024) emphasized the potential of assistive technology to strengthen learner participation and independence. Chen et al. (2021) identified differentiated instructional approaches as beneficial for student engagement and adaptive behavior development. Molina Roldán et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of inclusive interactions, while Mayger and Hochbein (2021) examined relational trust and social capital in community schools. Furthermore, Shochet et al. (2022) examined school-based interventions supporting resilience and social adaptation among adolescents with autism spectrum disorder. Ahmad and Parween (2022) emphasized positive behavioral support in inclusive classrooms, while Wang et al. (2024) highlighted professional development as an important factor in strengthening teachers' instructional competencies. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that effective social and adaptive skills instruction requires structured interventions, professional preparation, collaborative support, and learning opportunities that extend beyond conventional classroom instruction.

International educational practices increasingly recognize social and adaptive skills as essential components of inclusive education. In the United States, Individualized Education Programs incorporate functional competencies based on learners' specific needs, while European educational systems emphasize inclusive learning environments and practical life skills. Countries such as Sweden and Finland promote learning alongside peers without disabilities, whereas Japan and South Korea incorporate social competence, independent living, and transition preparation into special education programs. Despite these developments, teacher preparedness, curriculum adaptation, and resource availability remain important implementation concerns. In the Philippines, inclusive education policies support access to appropriate learning opportunities for children with disabilities. However, the implementation of social and adaptive skills instruction varies across educational institutions. Special education teachers may encounter limited instructional resources, insufficient specialized training, and difficulties balancing academic requirements with functional skills development. Within Cebu City and Talisay City, differences in institutional resources, teacher preparation, and instructional support influence the delivery of special education services. Although some schools provide dedicated programs and facilities, others experience inadequate learning materials and limited professional development opportunities. These conditions highlight the importance of examining classroom-level experiences to identify instructional practices and challenges within the local educational setting.

The study is anchored in the Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky (1978) and the Social Learning Theory of Bandura (1977), which explain how children develop social and adaptive competencies through interaction, guided participation, observation, and modeling. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the importance of social interaction and instructional scaffolding in cognitive and behavioral development. Through the zone of proximal development, learners acquire competencies with appropriate assistance from teachers, peers, and caregivers. This perspective supports structured guidance and collaborative learning in teaching functional behaviors to children with disabilities (Scott & Palincsar, 2013). Bandura (1977) explains learning through observation, imitation, and behavioral modeling. Within special education, teachers and peers demonstrate appropriate communication, self-care, and interpersonal behaviors that learners may observe and practice. The interaction of environmental,

cognitive, and behavioral factors further explains how supportive learning environments influence adaptive development (Raju, 2024). The study is also supported by Philippine legal and educational frameworks. Republic Act No. 10533 (2013), or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, promotes learner-centered education responsive to diverse learning needs. Republic Act No. 9442 (2007), which amends the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons, strengthens the protection of persons with disabilities against discrimination and promotes their participation in society. Department of Education Order No. 010, s. 2024, provides policy guidelines for the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum (Department of Education, 2024). Together, these frameworks establish the educational and policy basis for examining how special education teachers develop learners' social and adaptive competencies.

Although existing studies have examined instructional interventions, teacher preparedness, assistive technology, and family participation, the implementation of social and adaptive skills instruction within specific Philippine public school settings requires further examination. International research provides evidence supporting structured teaching approaches, but local classroom experiences may differ because of resource limitations, institutional conditions, and varying levels of teacher preparation. In Talisay City, limited information is available regarding how special education teachers integrate social and adaptive competencies into daily instruction, address implementation challenges, and identify effective strategies for children with disabilities. Understanding these experiences is necessary to develop contextually appropriate recommendations for curriculum improvement, teacher development, and instructional support. Accordingly, this study explores the experiences of special education teachers at Talisay City Central Elementary School during the school year 2024–2025. Specifically, it examines how teachers integrate social and adaptive skills into their curriculum, the challenges they encounter, and the instructional strategies they consider most effective. The findings serve as the basis for drawing implications for practice that may strengthen inclusive instruction and promote learners' functional independence. The study primarily aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), particularly its emphasis on inclusive and equitable educational opportunities. By examining instructional practices, teacher preparation, and learning support for children with disabilities, the research addresses factors influencing access to meaningful and responsive special education. Its focus on social and adaptive competencies supports educational approaches that develop both academic and functional abilities. The study also contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by emphasizing the educational participation, independence, and social inclusion of children with disabilities. Identifying barriers related to instructional resources, teacher preparation, and family participation may inform improvements that reduce inequalities in learning opportunities. These connections reflect the study's emphasis on strengthening inclusive educational practices and ensuring that children with disabilities receive appropriate support for meaningful participation in school and community life.

The study contributes to educational sustainability by identifying instructional practices and support mechanisms that may strengthen the continued delivery of inclusive special education. Understanding teachers' experiences can guide curriculum planners and school administrators in improving professional development, instructional resources, and classroom strategies that address learners' social and adaptive needs. Its contribution to social and community sustainability centers on developing independence, communication, and interpersonal competencies among children with disabilities. Strengthening these abilities may support greater participation in family, school, and community activities while encouraging inclusive relationships and reducing barriers to social engagement. From an institutional and policy perspective, the study provides contextual insights that may assist educational authorities in identifying resource needs, improving teacher support systems, and strengthening collaboration among educators, families, and other stakeholders. Such collaboration is important for reinforcing learned skills across school and home environments. Overall, the study emphasizes the interconnected roles of educational quality, social inclusion, institutional support, and family participation in promoting sustainable learning opportunities and functional independence among children with disabilities.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to investigate the lived experiences of special education teachers in developing social and adaptive skills among children with disabilities. Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their experiences (Engelland, 2020). This approach enabled the researcher to examine teachers' instructional practices, challenges, assessment approaches, and institutional support through their personal narratives and observations. The study followed an input-process-output framework. The input consisted of teachers' experiences concerning curriculum integration, instructional challenges, and effective teaching strategies. The process involved obtaining institutional permission, securing participant consent, conducting interviews, and analyzing the responses thematically. The output consisted of implications for practice intended to strengthen instructional approaches, address teaching challenges, and improve social and adaptive skills development among children with disabilities.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at Talisay City Central Elementary School, a public elementary institution under the Department of Education, Talisay City Division, Cebu, Philippines. The school provides basic education from kindergarten to Grade 6 and serves learners with diverse educational needs, including children with disabilities. Its special education and inclusive learning practices incorporate structured instruction and interventions intended to develop communication, self-care, social interaction, and daily living competencies. The institution served as the research setting for examining teachers' experiences in implementing social and adaptive skills instruction.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The participants consisted of five (5) special education teachers from Talisay City Central Elementary School, representing 100% of the study participants. These teachers were directly involved in providing instruction to children with disabilities and shared their experiences regarding curriculum integration, instructional challenges, and strategies for developing social and adaptive competencies. Their perspectives provided qualitative information about existing classroom practices and areas requiring instructional improvement.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive or judgmental sampling to select five (5) special education teachers whose professional experiences were relevant to the research objectives. According to Ahmad and Wilkins (2025), purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants based on specific characteristics or criteria appropriate to the investigation. This technique enabled the researcher to obtain information from teachers directly engaged in teaching social and adaptive skills to children with disabilities. The selection focused on participants capable of providing relevant insights into instructional practices, challenges, and opportunities for improving special education.

2.5 Research Instrument

The study utilized a researcher-developed semi-structured questionnaire containing five (5) open-ended questions written in English. The instrument was designed to gather information about special education teachers' experiences in teaching social and adaptive skills to children with disabilities. It explored instructional strategies, curriculum integration, classroom challenges, student engagement, assessment practices, resource availability, and institutional support. The open-ended format allowed participants to describe their experiences and perceptions in detail. Informed consent was also provided to ensure that participants understood the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their involvement.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection began with the submission of formal request letters to the superintendent of the Talisay City Division Office. Following approval, the authorized letters were forwarded to the school administrators to secure permission to conduct the study. The requests outlined the research objectives, procedures, and commitment to protecting participants' confidentiality. After obtaining the necessary permissions, the researcher conducted face-to-face, in-depth phenomenological interviews with the five special education teachers. Interviews were scheduled according to participants' availability, lasted approximately one hour each, and were completed over three days. The discussions focused on curriculum integration, instructional approaches, classroom management, student engagement, assessment practices, resource limitations, and institutional support. Before the interviews, participants were asked for permission to record their responses to ensure accuracy. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and prepared for thematic analysis. The information gathered served as the basis for identifying instructional experiences, challenges, and potential improvements in teaching social and adaptive skills to children with disabilities.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study employed thematic analysis to examine the participants' responses and identify recurring patterns concerning their experiences in teaching social and adaptive skills. The analytical procedure followed the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves systematically examining qualitative data to identify, organize, and interpret meaningful themes. The analysis consisted of six stages. First, recorded interviews were transcribed and repeatedly reviewed to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the responses. Second, significant statements were coded according to their relevance to instructional strategies, teaching challenges, assessment practices, and institutional support. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories to identify common patterns. Fourth, preliminary themes were developed from these categories. Fifth, the themes were reviewed and refined to eliminate overlaps and ensure consistency with the research objectives. Finally, an analytical narrative was developed to interpret the themes in relation to existing literature and theoretical foundations. The resulting themes provided insights into teachers' instructional practices, implementation challenges, and perceived effective strategies. These findings informed the development of implications for strengthening special education instruction and supporting the social and adaptive development of children with disabilities.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical principles to protect the rights, privacy, and welfare of its five teacher participants. The participants were informed about the study and their right to withdraw without penalty. No children were recruited as research participants or interviewed in this study. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of identification codes instead of participants' names. Research data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic and research purposes, with disposal scheduled one year after study completion. The study reported compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173, 2012).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Integration of Social and Adaptive Skills into the Curriculum

3.1.1 Regular Practice of Following Instructions and Routines

The five special education teachers identified consistent classroom routines as an essential approach to developing social and adaptive skills. Activities such as greeting teachers, lining up, organizing belongings, responding during attendance, and following step-by-step instructions helped students develop appropriate behavior, independence, and task management. Participants observed that repeated practice improved students' confidence, reduced their dependence on prompts, and strengthened their ability to follow instructions. These findings suggest that structured routines may provide predictability, support task completion, and encourage independence among students with disabilities. Webster et al. (2022) examined the importance of supporting autistic students' self-determination during transitions, a related but distinct goal. The findings underscore the importance of maintaining structured classroom routines, providing clear instructions, and encouraging parents to reinforce these practices at home to support skill retention and generalization.

3.1.2 Integration of Daily Living Skills in Health Lessons

The participants reported integrating practical daily living skills into health education through demonstrations and hands-on activities. Students practiced personal hygiene, handwashing, tooth brushing, grooming, and healthy eating habits. Teachers used pictures, demonstrations, and actual activities to help students understand and apply health-related concepts. These practices made lessons more relevant to students' everyday experiences and encouraged greater participation in self-care activities. The findings support Roberts (2023), who emphasized that incorporating functional skills into academic instruction strengthens students' understanding of practical applications. Likewise, Khasawneh (2024) highlighted the importance of integrating daily living competencies across curriculum areas to promote independence. These findings suggest that health education should include practical learning opportunities supported by appropriate instructional materials and home-based reinforcement to strengthen students' self-care skills and functional independence.

3.1.3 Participation in School-Wide Social Events

The teachers identified participation in school-wide activities as an important opportunity for students with disabilities to develop social interaction and adaptive behavior. Flag ceremonies, sports activities, school celebrations, and educational programs allowed students to interact with peers, follow group instructions, participate in performances, and practice appropriate behavior in larger social settings. Participants observed that these experiences encouraged friendships, confidence, cooperation, and a stronger sense of belonging within the school community. These findings are consistent with Wang et al. (2023), who emphasized that inclusive school activities improve peer relationships and social acceptance among students with disabilities. Bakken (2024) similarly highlighted the importance of authentic social experiences in developing confidence and school belonging. The results emphasize the need for schools to provide accessible social activities, appropriate accommodations, and peer support to strengthen students' participation and prepare them for interactions beyond the classroom.

3.2 Challenges in Teaching Social and Adaptive Skills

3.2.1 Limited Access to Specialized Training for Teachers

The participants identified insufficient specialized professional development as a major challenge in teaching social and adaptive skills. Although teachers received general training in lesson planning and academic instruction, they reported limited opportunities to develop expertise in functional life skills, adaptive behavior, and social interventions. Consequently, some relied on personal experience, peer consultations, and trial-and-error approaches. Teachers expressed the need for practical workshops, expert-led seminars, and specialized coaching to strengthen their instructional competence. These findings correspond with Crispel and Kasperski (2021), who reported that insufficient specialized preparation affects teachers' confidence in delivering functional life skills instruction. Wang et al. (2024) identified practical exercises, performance feedback, and on-site coaching as important components of special education teacher training. Furthermore, Bloomfield et al. (2024) identified explicit instruction, modeling, practice, performance feedback, and individualized coaching as important components of effective professional development for educators implementing evidence-based behavioral supports. The findings indicate that school administrators and educational authorities should prioritize specialized

training, mentoring, and collaborative professional learning to improve teachers' capacity to develop students' independence and adaptive competencies.

3.2.2 Shortage of SPED-Specific Materials and Equipment

The teachers reported inadequate access to specialized instructional resources, including visual schedules, communication aids, adaptive utensils, grooming kits, and functional task materials. Limited funding required educators to improvise using printed pictures, recycled materials, and ordinary classroom supplies. Participants explained that the absence of appropriate equipment restricted opportunities for hands-on instruction and individualized learning, particularly when teaching practical daily living skills. Manase (2023) examined assistive techniques devised by university students with learning disabilities, offering a related perspective on adaptation when support resources are limited. Mahmood et al. (2025) likewise emphasized the importance of specialized and practical resources in improving special education instruction. The results highlight the need for dedicated funding, resource allocation, and partnerships with community organizations to provide suitable instructional equipment and strengthen experiential learning opportunities for children with disabilities.

3.2.3 Low Parental Involvement in Skills Generalization

The participants identified limited parental involvement as a significant challenge in reinforcing social and adaptive skills outside school. Teachers observed that some parents prioritized academic achievement over functional life skills or depended primarily on teachers to develop these competencies. As a result, students who demonstrated progress in classroom activities sometimes struggled to retain or apply learned behaviors at home. Participants emphasized the importance of consistent parental participation in strengthening students' independence. These findings align with Davis (2021), who emphasized the importance of family involvement in transferring learned skills across environments. Similarly, Mayger and Hochbein (2021) discussed relational trust and social capital in community schools. The findings suggest that schools should strengthen parental engagement through practical workshops, home-based activity guides, and regular communication to ensure consistent reinforcement of social and adaptive competencies.

3.3 Effective Instructional Strategies for Improving Social and Adaptive Skills

3.3.1 Use of Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)

The participants identified the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) as an effective instructional strategy for students with limited verbal communication abilities. Through picture cards, students learned to express their needs, request objects, make choices, and communicate with teachers and peers. Teachers observed that using PECS reduced communication-related frustration, improved classroom behavior, and encouraged more independent communication among students who experienced difficulty expressing themselves verbally. These findings are supported by Iftikhar et al. (2024), who discussed evidence-based practices for improving communication among children with autism spectrum disorder from speech therapists' perspectives. Kruger (2022) similarly reported improvements in communication and reductions in challenging behaviors associated with communication difficulties. The results emphasize the importance of providing PECS materials, individualized communication boards, teacher training, and parental guidance to support consistent communication development across school and home environments.

3.3.2 Pairing Students for Cooperative Learning Tasks

The teachers identified peer pairing as an effective approach to developing communication, cooperation, and adaptive behavior among students with disabilities. Pairing students with classmates of similar or higher skill levels created opportunities to practice asking questions, following instructions, taking turns, listening, and completing shared activities. Participants observed increased motivation, confidence, mutual assistance, and social interaction when students worked collaboratively rather than independently. These findings are consistent with Khanna and Bhola (2023), who found that cooperative learning promotes collaboration and social responsibility. The results suggest that structured peer activities should be incorporated into classroom instruction, supported by appropriate teacher guidance and inclusive practices that encourage teamwork, empathy, and social participation.

3.3.3 Conducting Real-Life Simulations

The participants described real-life simulations as an effective strategy for developing practical adaptive skills. Classroom activities included preparing sandwiches, pouring drinks, setting tables, practicing dining etiquette, and cleaning after meals. These structured experiences allowed students to practice daily living tasks in a controlled environment while developing responsibility, confidence, and independence. Teachers emphasized that simulated activities helped students connect classroom instruction with responsibilities encountered at home and in the community. These findings align with Salido and Breviescas (2024), who emphasized that authentic learning experiences support skill generalization and independence. The results indicate that real-life simulations should be integrated into special education instruction, supported by appropriate materials and parental participation to strengthen students' functional independence.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concludes that special education teachers at Talisay City Central Elementary School integrate social and adaptive skills into classroom instruction through structured daily routines, practical health lessons, and participation in school-wide activities. Based on the experiences of five purposively selected teachers, these approaches provide opportunities for children with disabilities to develop communication, self-care, cooperation, and functional independence. Teachers also identified the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), cooperative learning, and real-life simulations as useful instructional strategies for addressing learners' diverse needs. However, limited specialized training, inadequate SPED-specific materials, and insufficient parental involvement remain significant challenges in delivering consistent instruction and reinforcing acquired skills beyond the classroom. Collectively, the findings emphasize that developing social and adaptive competencies requires practical, individualized instruction supported by appropriate resources, teacher preparation, and sustained home-school collaboration. The study contributes contextual insights into instructional practices and challenges within the participating school's special education setting.

The Department of Education and school administrators should prioritize specialized professional development programs focusing on adaptive behavior, functional life skills, communication strategies, and practical instructional approaches for special education teachers. Schools should allocate appropriate resources for SPED-specific materials, including visual schedules, communication boards, adaptive equipment, and functional learning kits to strengthen hands-on instruction. Teachers should maintain structured classroom routines, integrate daily living skills into health lessons, and provide inclusive opportunities through school-wide activities. The continued use of PECS, cooperative learning, and real-life simulations should be supported through instructional planning and appropriate teaching resources. Schools should also strengthen parental involvement by conducting practical workshops, providing home-based activity guides, and establishing regular communication between teachers and families. General education teachers should collaborate with special education teachers to promote inclusive participation. The proposed implications for practice should be considered for implementation to address identified instructional challenges and strengthen students' social and adaptive skill development.

This study was limited to five purposively selected special education teachers from Talisay City Central Elementary School, Cebu, Philippines, during the school year 2024–2025. Its qualitative phenomenological design relied on participants' interview responses and personal experiences, analyzed through thematic analysis. Consequently, the findings reflect teachers' perceptions and reported instructional practices within a specific educational setting rather than statistically generalizable outcomes. The study did not directly measure students' skill development or independently evaluate the effectiveness of instructional strategies. Future research may include participants from additional schools, incorporate direct observations of classroom practices, and examine students' social and adaptive skill development across different educational contexts.

5. Compliance with ethical standards

The study observed ethical standards to protect the rights, privacy, and welfare of all participants. Permission was obtained from the Schools Division Office of Talisay City and the participating school authorities before data collection. Participants were informed of the study's objectives and procedures, and their voluntary participation and right to withdraw without penalty were respected. Consent was sought before recording interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through identification codes, while collected data were securely stored, used exclusively for academic purposes, and scheduled for disposal one year after study completion, in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173, 2012). Interview responses were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically to maintain research integrity. The manuscript did not specify funding sources or conflicts of interest; these declarations require confirmation from the researcher before publication.

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