
Joys of Special Education Teachers in Self-Contained Classrooms

SHAHANI JOYCE GAZMIN LIBUNAO

Pangasinan State University School of Advanced Studies

shahanigazmin@gmail.com

Abstract — This study explored the joys and positive experiences of Special Education (SPED) teachers assigned in self-contained classrooms during the School Year 2025–2026. Specifically, the study aimed to identify the profile of the respondents, examine their positive teaching experiences in handling learners with special needs, and propose a program that may help sustain their emotional well-being, motivation, resilience, and professional fulfillment. The study was anchored on the Self-Determination Theory of Deci and Ryan (2000) and the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions by Fredrickson (2001), which emphasized the importance of motivation, meaningful relationships, and positive emotions in strengthening well-being and professional satisfaction.

The study utilized a qualitative descriptive research design with a mixed-methods text mining approach. Purposive sampling was used in selecting five SPED teachers assigned in self-contained classrooms. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis, word frequency analysis, topic modeling, and Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI).

The findings revealed that SPED teachers experience joy and fulfillment through adaptive teaching practices, learner progress, emotional connection with learners, and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Teachers emphasized the importance of differentiated instruction, visual supports, structured routines, experiential learning, and individualized strategies in promoting learner engagement and participation. Learner achievements, even small improvements in communication, behavior, and participation, served as major sources of emotional fulfillment, motivation, and purpose. Despite emotional, behavioral, and instructional challenges, teachers viewed these experiences as opportunities to strengthen their patience, resilience, flexibility, and commitment to the profession.

Three major themes emerged from the study: (1) Instructional Strategies and Adaptation, (2) Learner Progress and Emotional Impact, and (3) Challenges, Motivation, and Teacher Growth. Based on the findings, the researcher proposed Project SUSTAIN (Supporting and Upholding SPED Teachers Through Adaptive and Inclusive Nurturing), a school-based intervention program designed to sustain the emotional wellness, resilience, motivation, and professional fulfillment of SPED teachers through instructional enhancement, emotional support, resilience-building activities, and collaborative professional support systems.

Keywords: Special Education (SPED), Self-Contained Classrooms, Teacher Well-Being, Learner Progress, Positive Teaching Experiences, Emotional Resilience, Adaptive Instruction, Teacher Motivation, Professional Fulfillment, Inclusive Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Special Education (SPED) teachers play a significant role in supporting learners with diverse academic, behavioral, emotional, and developmental needs. In self-contained classrooms, teachers provide individualized instruction, behavior management, emotional support, and adaptive teaching strategies that help learners with disabilities participate effectively in the learning process. These classrooms are designed to provide structured and supportive learning environments for learners who require intensive educational assistance. Marilyn Friend and William D. Bursuck (2018), in *Including Students with Special Needs: A Practical Guide for Classroom Teachers*, emphasized that adaptive and learner-centered instructional practices are essential in meeting the diverse needs of learners with disabilities.

Existing literature commonly focuses on the challenges experienced by SPED teachers, including stress, workload, emotional exhaustion, and classroom management difficulties. Daniel P. Hallahan, James M. Kauffman, and Paige C. Pullen (2022), in *Exceptional Learners: An Introduction to Special Education*, explained that SPED teachers perform multiple responsibilities, such as implementing individualized educational programs, modifying instructional materials, and supporting learners' emotional and social development. Despite these professional demands, many SPED teachers remain committed to the profession because of meaningful teaching experiences and positive learner interactions.

Several studies have emphasized the importance of positive emotions, meaningful relationships, and learner progress in strengthening teachers' motivation and professional fulfillment. Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan (2000), in *The "What" and "Why" of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior*, explained that competence, autonomy, and meaningful relationships contribute significantly to motivation and psychological well-being. Similarly, Barbara Fredrickson (2001), in *The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions*, emphasized that positive emotional experiences strengthen resilience, emotional well-being, and coping abilities. Learner achievements, supportive classroom experiences, and caring teacher-learner relationships often become important sources of joy and satisfaction among SPED teachers.

Although numerous studies have explored the stress and challenges experienced by SPED teachers, limited research has focused on the positive emotional experiences and sources of joy among teachers assigned in self-contained classrooms, particularly within the Philippine context. Hence, this study sought to explore the lived experiences and sources of joy among SPED teachers and provide a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to their motivation, resilience, and professional fulfillment. The findings of the study may help educational institutions and school administrators develop programs and support systems that promote teacher well-being and strengthen professional support in special education settings.

Literature Review

Special education is recognized as an essential component of inclusive and learner-centered educational systems. Educational frameworks emphasize the importance of supportive learning environments that address the academic, behavioral, emotional, and developmental needs of learners with disabilities. Marilyn Friend and William D. Bursuck (2018), in *Including Students with Special Needs: A Practical Guide for Classroom Teachers*, explained that self-contained classrooms provide structured environments where instructional strategies are adapted according to learners' individual needs. Similarly, Daniel P. Hallahan, James M. Kauffman, and Paige C. Pullen (2022), in *Exceptional Learners: An Introduction to Special Education*, emphasized that adaptive

teaching approaches in self-contained classrooms support learner participation, behavior management, and specialized instruction.

SPED teachers assigned in self-contained classrooms perform responsibilities that extend beyond classroom instruction. Hallahan et al. (2022) discussed that SPED teachers prepare individualized educational programs, modify instructional materials, implement differentiated instruction, and collaborate with parents and other professionals to support learners with special needs. In addition, Michael L. Wehmeyer (2017), in *Self-Determination and Individuals with Severe Disabilities: Re-examining Meanings and Misinterpretations*, emphasized that SPED teachers also support learners' communication skills, independence, emotional development, and self-determination. These responsibilities require patience, adaptability, resilience, and strong professional commitment.

Several scholars have emphasized the importance of motivation, emotional well-being, and positive experiences among educators. Martin Seligman (2011), in *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, explained that individuals experience greater fulfillment when their work provides meaning, accomplishment, engagement, and positive relationships. Likewise, Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan (2000), in their journal article *The "What" and "Why" of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior*, explained that autonomy, competence, and meaningful social relationships contribute significantly to motivation and psychological well-being.

Positive emotional experiences also play an important role in strengthening teachers' resilience and professional satisfaction. Barbara Fredrickson (2001), in *The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions*, explained that positive emotions improve individuals' ability to cope with stress and develop emotional resilience. Correspondingly, Nel Noddings (2013), in *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, emphasized that caring teacher-learner relationships contribute to meaningful classroom experiences, emotional connection, and learner development. Furthermore, Linda Darling-Hammond (2017), in *Empowered Educators: How High-Performing Systems Shape Teaching Quality Around the World*, highlighted that supportive professional environments and adaptive teaching practices strengthen teachers' effectiveness, motivation, and commitment.

Although numerous studies have focused on stress, burnout, and challenges experienced by SPED teachers, limited research has explored the positive experiences and sources of joy among teachers assigned in self-contained classrooms, particularly within the Philippine educational context. Hence, this study sought to explore the lived experiences and sources of joy among SPED teachers and provide a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to their motivation, fulfillment, resilience, and sense of purpose in teaching learners with special needs.

II. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive research design employing a mixed-methods text mining approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the lived experiences and sources of joy among SPED teachers in self-contained classrooms. Qualitative thematic interpretation and computational text analysis were integrated to strengthen the credibility and depth of the findings.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in selected private schools in Tarlac City, Philippines, offering Special Education (SPED) programs with self-contained classrooms for learners with disabilities. These schools provided an appropriate environment for examining the experiences and emotional well-being of SPED teachers.

Participants of the Study

The participants consisted of five (5) SPED teachers assigned in self-contained classrooms during the School Year 2025–2026. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and had at least three years of teaching experience in handling learners with special needs.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in the study was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide. The instrument included questions related to the participants' profile and open-ended questions designed to explore their positive experiences, sources of joy, motivation, and fulfillment in teaching learners with special needs.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The interview guide underwent content validation by qualified experts in Special Education and research. Suggestions and recommendations from the validators were incorporated to ensure the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the instrument with the objectives of the study.

Data

The data consisted of interview transcripts gathered from semi-structured interviews with SPED teachers. The collected responses focused on the participants' lived experiences, meaningful teaching moments, emotional fulfillment, and sources of joy in self-contained classrooms.

Statistical Analysis

The study utilized text preprocessing, word frequency analysis, topic modeling using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), topic coherence analysis, and semantic analysis using Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI) through Singular Value Decomposition (SVD). These analyses were used to identify recurring themes and semantic relationships within the interview data.

Interpretation of Non-Significant Findings

Non-significant findings were interpreted cautiously and were considered part of the natural variation of participants' experiences. The absence of strong patterns or themes in some responses did not invalidate the participants' perspectives but instead reflected the diversity and complexity of SPED teachers lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards in conducting research. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection. Confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time were strictly observed.

Feasibility of the Study

The study was considered feasible due to the accessibility of qualified participants, availability of research instruments, and manageable scope of the study. The use of semi-structured interviews and text mining techniques also allowed efficient collection and analysis of qualitative data within the planned research timeline.

Research Timeline

Phase	Activity	Timeframe
Phase 1	Instrument development, validation, Ethics review	Month 1-2
Phase 2	Institutional approval and participant recruitment	Month 3
Phase 3	Data collection	Months 4
Phase 4	Data encoding and statistical analysis	Month 5
Phase 5	Interpretation, writing, and dissemination	Month 6

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of the Respondents

Table 1 presents the profile of the SPED teachers assigned in self-contained classrooms, including their age, sex, educational background, years of teaching experience in SPED, and types of learners handled.

TABLE 1
PROFILE OF THE SPED TEACHERS ASSIGNED IN SELF-CONTAINED CLASSROOM

Respondent	Age	Sex	Civil Status	Educational Background	Years of Teaching in SPED	Type of Learners Handled
R1	33	Female	Single	AB Psychology	5	ASD, ADHD, Down syndrome, Learning disability

R2	27	Female	Single	BSE Physical Education	4	ASD, ADHD, Down syndrome, Learning disability
R3	25	Male	Single	BSE Technology and Livelihood Education	3	ASD, ADHD, Down syndrome, Learning disability, Intellectual disability
R4	39	Male	Single	Nursing	11	ASD, ADHD, Learning disability, Intellectual disability
R5	25	Female	Single	AB Psychology	4	ASD, ADHD, Down syndrome, Learning disability

The respondents consisted of five SPED teachers assigned in self-contained classrooms with diverse educational backgrounds, including Psychology, Physical Education, Technology and Livelihood Education, and Nursing. They had three to eleven years of teaching experience in special education and handled learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), ADHD, Down syndrome, learning disabilities, and intellectual disabilities. These varied experiences provided diverse perspectives on instructional strategies, classroom management, and learner support.

The findings indicate that SPED teaching requires flexibility, patience, and adaptive instructional competence regardless of teachers' academic backgrounds. Daniel P. Hallahan, James M. Kauffman, and Paige C. Pullen (2022), in their book *Exceptional Learners: An Introduction to Special Education*, emphasized that SPED teachers perform multiple instructional, behavioral, and emotional support roles in self-contained classroom settings.

Positive Experiences of SPED Teachers

Table 2 presents the most frequently used words mentioned by the respondents regarding their teaching experiences.

TABLE 2
TOP WORDS DESCRIBING SPED TEACHERS' POSITIVE EXPERIENCES IN SELF-CONTAINED CLASSROOMS

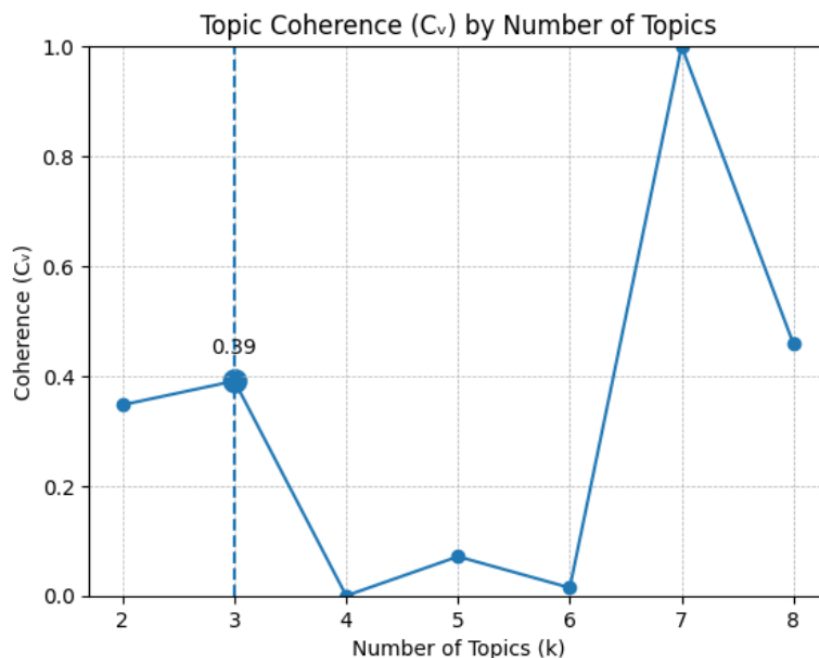
Word	Word Count
Teaching	22
Teacher	20
Time	19
Sped	18
One	17
Learners	17
Even	17
More	15
What	14
Learner	13
Who	13
Children	13
Became	13
Can	12
Felt	12
Used	11
able	11
Tasks	11
During	10
First	10
patience	10
moment	10
learning	10
materials	10
feel	10

The word frequency analysis revealed that terms such as “teaching,” “teacher,” “learners,” and “children” were the most frequently used words in describing the positive experiences and sources of joy among SPED teachers in self-contained classrooms. These findings suggest that teachers’ fulfillment and motivation are strongly rooted in meaningful interactions with learners and in witnessing learners’ growth and participation. Furthermore, words such as “felt,” “able,” and “became” reflected emotional fulfillment, increased confidence, and professional growth among the respondents.

The results further indicate that positive classroom experiences contribute significantly to teachers’ sense of competence, emotional well-being, and professional satisfaction. Martin Seligman (2011), in his book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, explained that positive emotions, meaningful engagement, and accomplishment are essential components of well-being. Similarly, Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan (2000), through their work on *Self-Determination Theory*, emphasized that competence, relatedness, and meaningful relationships strengthen motivation and professional fulfillment.

Figure 1 shows the coherence scores obtained for different topic models to determine the most suitable number of topics.

FIGURE 1
TOPIC COHERENCE



Topic Coherence Analysis

Although the seven-topic model obtained the highest coherence score, the three-topic model was selected because it produced clearer and more meaningful themes. The three-topic model reduced overlapping ideas and better reflected the instructional, emotional, and professional experiences of SPED teachers.

The results highlight the importance of thematic clarity and relevance in accurately interpreting teachers' lived experiences. John W. Creswell (2014), in his book *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, emphasized that qualitative analysis should focus on themes that meaningfully represent participants' perspectives and experiences.

Emerging Themes

Table 3 presents the identified topics and emerging themes generated through Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI) analysis of the respondents' narratives.

TABLE 3
IDENTIFIED TOPIC USING LATENT SEMANTIC INDEXING

Topic	Topic Label (Interpretation)	Topic Terms	Key Themes
Topic 1	Instructional Strategies and Adaptation	teacher, teaching, sped, time, learners, children, learner, felt, moment, used	Use of differentiated instruction, visual supports, and structured routines to meet diverse learner needs.
Topic 2	Learner Progress and Emotional Impact	used, tasks, engaged, lesson, highly, visual, materials, activities, hands, learners	Learner progress in communication and tasks, with strong emotional impact and teacher–student connection.
Topic 3	Challenges, Motivation, and Teacher Growth	meaningful, experience, share, learner, response, impact, moment, felt, task, tool	Challenges in behavior and instruction that foster patience, resilience, and professional growth.

Three major themes emerged from the study: (1) Instructional Strategies and Adaptation, (2) Learner Progress and Emotional Impact, and (3) Challenges, Motivation, and Teacher Growth. These themes addressed the study objectives and highlighted the major factors contributing to SPED teachers' joy and professional fulfillment.

The first theme emphasized adaptive and learner-centered instructional strategies such as differentiated instruction, visual supports, experiential learning, structure, patience, and repetition.

Teachers experienced fulfillment when they successfully modified instruction according to learners' needs and observed positive engagement and participation. The results demonstrate that adaptive teaching practices not only improve learner participation but also strengthen teachers' confidence and instructional effectiveness. Marilyn Friend and William D. Bursuck (2018), in their book *Including Students with Special Needs: A Practical Guide for Classroom Teachers*, emphasized the importance of learner-centered and adaptive teaching practices in special education. Similarly, Linda Darling-Hammond (2017), in *Empowered Educators: How High-Performing Systems Shape Teaching Quality Around the World*, highlighted that responsive and inclusive instructional practices contribute significantly to effective teaching and learner engagement.

In relation to emotional fulfillment, the second theme highlighted how learner progress and meaningful teacher-learner relationships contributed to teachers' motivation and sense of purpose. Even small improvements in learners' communication, behavior, and participation strengthened teachers' confidence and commitment to teaching. The analysis indicates that learner progress serves as an important source of emotional satisfaction and professional dedication among SPED teachers. Nel Noddings (2013), in *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, emphasized that caring relationships are central to meaningful educational experiences. In addition, Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan (2000), through their work on *Self-Determination Theory*, explained that competence, relatedness, and positive social interactions strengthen motivation and well-being. Likewise, Barbara Fredrickson (2001), in her journal article *The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions*, explained that positive emotional experiences help individuals develop resilience and psychological well-being.

Beyond emotional fulfillment, the third theme revealed that challenges in self-contained classrooms also contributed to teachers' resilience, adaptability, and professional growth. Despite emotional and instructional difficulties, teachers viewed these experiences as opportunities to strengthen patience, flexibility, and commitment to supporting learners with special needs. The data further suggest that overcoming classroom challenges helps teachers develop stronger emotional resilience and long-term dedication to the profession. Bonnie Billingsley (2020), in her work on special education teacher retention and resilience, explained that meaningful teaching

experiences and supportive environments help sustain teachers' commitment and effectiveness in special education settings.

Collectively, the findings indicate that both rewarding learner experiences and challenging teaching situations play a vital role in sustaining the emotional well-being, motivation, and long-term dedication of SPED teachers in self-contained classroom settings. The themes identified in the study reflect how adaptive instruction, meaningful teacher-learner relationships, and resilience developed through classroom challenges contribute to teachers' professional fulfillment and commitment in special education. These findings are consistent with Linda Darling-Hammond (2017), in *Empowered Educators: How High-Performing Systems Shape Teaching Quality Around the World*, which emphasized that supportive teaching environments and meaningful professional experiences strengthen teacher effectiveness and commitment. Similarly, Barbara Fredrickson (2001), in her journal article *The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions*, explained that positive emotional experiences foster resilience, motivation, and psychological well-being among professionals.

Proposed Program

Based on the findings, the researcher proposed Project SUSTAIN (Supporting and Upholding SPED Teachers Through Adaptive and Inclusive Nurturing), a school-based intervention program designed to sustain the joy, emotional well-being, resilience, and professional fulfillment of SPED teachers. The program includes instructional enhancement, emotional wellness activities, resilience-building seminars, mentoring programs, and collaborative professional support systems.

The proposed intervention underscores the importance of continuous emotional and professional support for SPED teachers in contemporary educational settings. Linda Darling-Hammond (2017), in *Empowered Educators: How High-Performing Systems Shape Teaching Quality Around the World*, emphasized that professional support systems strengthen teaching effectiveness and commitment. Correspondingly, Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan (2000), through *Self-Determination Theory*, highlighted that supportive environments and meaningful relationships

enhance motivation and well-being. Moreover, Barbara Fredrickson (2001), in *The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions*, explained that positive emotions and resilience contribute to long-term personal and professional growth.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study explored the positive experiences and sources of joy among SPED teachers assigned in self-contained classrooms during the School Year 2025–2026 using a qualitative descriptive research design with a mixed-methods text mining approach. Data gathered through semi-structured interviews revealed that SPED teachers find fulfillment through adaptive teaching practices, learner progress, emotional connections with learners, and professional growth despite classroom challenges. Three major themes emerged: (1) Instructional Strategies and Adaptation, (2) Learner Progress and Emotional Impact, and (3) Challenges, Motivation, and Teacher Growth.

The findings suggest that positive learner engagement, meaningful teacher-learner relationships, and resilience developed through challenging experiences contribute significantly to teachers' motivation, emotional well-being, and commitment in SPED classrooms. These results support previous studies emphasizing the importance of adaptive instruction, emotional support, resilience, and learner-centered practices in special education.

Based on the findings, the researcher proposed Project SUSTAIN (Supporting and Upholding SPED Teachers Through Adaptive and Inclusive Nurturing), a school-based intervention program aimed at strengthening the emotional well-being, resilience, motivation, and professional fulfillment of SPED teachers to help sustain their effectiveness and commitment in self-contained classroom settings.

REFERENCES

- [1.] Billingsley, B. (2020). Special education teacher retention and attrition: A critical analysis of the research literature. *The Journal of Special Education*, 54(1), 5–16.
- [2.] Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- [3.] Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). *Empowered educators: How high-performing systems shape teaching quality around the world*. Jossey-Bass.
- [4.] Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.
- [5.] Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 218–226.
- [6.] Friend, M., & Bursuck, W. D. (2018). *Including students with special needs: A practical guide for classroom teachers* (8th ed.). Pearson.
- [7.] Hallahan, D. P., Kauffman, J. M., & Pullen, P. C. (2022). *Exceptional learners: An introduction to special education* (15th ed.). Pearson.
- [8.] Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- [9.] Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Free Press.
- [10.] Wehmeyer, M. L. (2017). *Self-determination and individuals with severe disabilities: Re-examining meanings and misinterpretations*. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 42(1), 6–19.