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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Understanding Non-Specialist Teachers' Experiences of Teaching Children with Special Needs: a Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to reveal the experiences of non-specialist teachers in schools for children with special needs in Kurdistan Province. The study population consisted of all non-specialist teachers working in special needs schools in the province. Among them, fifteen teachers who lacked formal education in special needs instruction and had at least one year of teaching experience were selected as the sample through purposive criterion sampling. This research was conducted using a phenomenological approach, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the purposively selected teachers. Data analysis was carried out using Colaizzi's method and MAXQDA software, through which the main and subthemes related to the teachers' experiences were extracted. The findings indicated that non-specialist teachers rely on personal resilience, individual adaptability, and efforts to understand and recognize the characteristics of children in order to cope with the teaching environment. Individual-motivational factors and interactions with families and parents also play a significant role in shaping their attitudes and emotions. Meanwhile, the teachers face various challenges in structural-organizational aspects, teacher preparation and training, and the characteristics of students and the learning process, all of which influence their work experiences. The study shows that the employment of non-specialist teachers in schools for children with special needs often results from staff shortages, and addressing this issue requires fundamental decisions at the administrative level. Furthermore, providing essential training courses before assigning non-specialist individuals can improve teaching quality and support these teachers.

KEYWORDS

Non Specialist Teaching, Students With Special Needs, Teaching, Specialization, Phenomenology

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Introduction

The quality of education for students with special needs is a fundamental benchmark for evaluating the equity and efficiency of modern educational systems. Special education is designed to provide tailored support for children with diverse developmental, sensory, and cognitive profiles, ensuring that their unique potential is realized through specialized instructional methods. However, the effectiveness of these services is heavily dependent on the professional competence and specialized training of the teachers involved. A significant global challenge in this field is the phenomenon of out-of-field teaching, where educators are assigned to teach subjects or student populations that do not align with their formal academic preparation (Ingersoll, 1999).

Teaching outside one's area of expertise is often conceptualized as a boundary-crossing event that can undermine a teacher's professional identity and pedagogical confidence (Hobbs, 2012). In the realm of special education, this issue is further complicated by the high emotional and instructional demands of the classroom. Research suggests that structural and organizational constraints, such as teacher shortages and administrative pressures, frequently compel schools to employ non-specialist staff (Marai & Meier, 2004). This mismatch between teacher training and the complex needs of students can lead to increased stress and a potential decline in the quality of learning (Butler et al., 2019).

In the Iranian educational context, qualitative evidence indicates that such unprofessionalism is often not a result of teacher preference but is driven by systemic factors and administrative requirements (Shirbegi et al., 2018). Despite its prevalence, the lived experiences of non-specialist teachers who navigate the complexities of special education remain under-researched. Understanding how these individuals adapt to their roles and the specific challenges they face is crucial for developing supportive policies and professional development programs. Therefore, the present study employs a phenomenological approach to explore and interpret the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of non-specialist teachers working with children with special needs.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative approach using phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of non-specialist teachers working in schools for children with special needs. The focus was on teachers whose university education was unrelated to special education but who had at least one year of teaching experience in such schools in Kurdistan Province. Participants were selected through purposive criterion sampling to identify individuals who could provide rich and relevant descriptions of the phenomenon under study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers. After each interview, the recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed several times to obtain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method, including repeated reading, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, and integration of findings into an exhaustive description. MAXQDA 2020 software was used to support the coding and organization of themes.

To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by returning interview transcripts and extracted open codes to participants for confirmation. Peer review and inter-coder reliability were also used to strengthen internal validity. In addition, the findings were interpreted in light of prior research on out-of-field teaching and qualitative rigor (Armour & Williams, 2022; McConney & Price, 2009).

Findings

The findings showed that the experiences of non-specialist teachers in schools for children with special needs were shaped by three interrelated areas: adaptation to the teaching environment, factors influencing their perceptions and emotions, and the challenges they encountered in practice.

Regarding the first research question, participants reported that adaptation to special education settings was a gradual and multidimensional process. This adaptation was mainly supported by personal resilience, professional learning, and efforts to understand students with special needs. Teachers described patience as a fundamental quality for coping with the emotional and instructional demands of the classroom. Prior familiarity with children with special needs, learning through direct experience, and gradually developing interest in the field also facilitated adjustment. In addition, teachers emphasized the importance of practical training, self-directed learning through books and videos, updating professional knowledge, attending training courses, and receiving support from colleagues. Another major aspect of adaptation was the effort to understand students' individual characteristics. Teachers highlighted the need to create a safe and supportive environment, avoid harsh and rigid behavior, refrain from comparing children with special needs to typically developing peers, and recognize that educational progress in this context is often slow. Empathy, without pity, and appreciation of these children's innocence were central to teachers' understanding of effective practice.

Regarding the second research question, teachers' perceptions and emotions were influenced by both individual-motivational factors and family-related factors. On the individual level, interest in the profession, prior experience with children with disabilities, satisfaction with career choice, and a sense of commitment were found to strengthen positive attitudes toward teaching in these schools. Several participants stressed that interest, patience, and work ethic were more important than formal academic specialization alone. At the same time, interactions with families strongly affected teachers' emotional experiences. Parents' non-acceptance of their child's condition, inappropriate treatment of the child, limited awareness, and financial difficulties were repeatedly described as emotionally challenging for teachers and as factors that complicated the educational process.

Regarding the third research question, the findings revealed three major categories of challenges: structural-organizational challenges, challenges related to teacher preparation, and challenges associated with student characteristics and the learning process. Structural problems included staff shortages, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient facilities and teaching aids, delayed distribution of textbooks, lack of specialized personnel, weak organization, and inappropriate placement of students in unsuitable classes. Challenges related to teacher preparation included difficult early years of service, lack of adequate training, the overly theoretical nature of available courses, and, in some cases, lack of initial interest in working in special education. Finally, student-related challenges included multiple disabilities, behavioral difficulties, strong emotional attachment between teachers and students, the demanding nature of the work, and the growing number of educable intellectually disabled students, all of which intensified the complexity of teaching.

Overall, the findings indicate that non-specialist teachers' experiences are shaped by the interaction of individual, relational, and structural factors. Although they face substantial challenges, they gradually develop adaptive strategies to sustain their professional engagement and respond to the complex realities of teaching in special education settings.

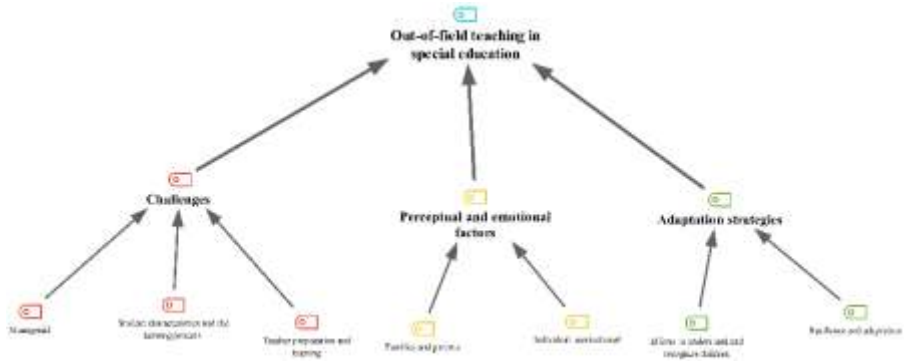


Figure 1. *Conceptual model of the experiences of non-specialist teachers in schools for children with special needs.*

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the experiences of non-specialist teachers in special education schools are shaped by a dynamic interaction of personal, relational, and structural factors. Despite significant challenges—including limited resources, insufficient preparation, and complex student needs—teachers gradually develop resilience, adaptive strategies, and empathetic practices that enable meaningful engagement with students. Individual motivation, professional commitment, and supportive relationships play a crucial role in fostering positive perceptions and sustained involvement. However, structural and training-related shortcomings remain substantial barriers. Improving professional preparation, institutional support, and family–school collaboration is essential to enhance teacher effectiveness and the overall quality of education for students with special needs.

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