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Navigating Inclusion: Challenges Faced by Teachers in the Peninsula of Santa Elena in Supporting Students and Families with Special Education Needs

Navegando la inclusión: desafíos que enfrentan los docentes en la península de Santa Elena al apoyar a estudiantes y familias con necesidades educativas especiales

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolving landscape of inclusive education in Ecuador, focusing on the challenges faced by special education (SEN) teachers, especially in the Santa Elena region. Ecuador's Ministry of Education has adopted inclusive education policies to support students with various physical, cognitive, and socioemotional needs. However, SEN teachers encounter substantial challenges, such as managing classrooms with diverse disabilities, limited institutional support, non-instructional responsibilities, and lack of public recognition. These obstacles contribute to high stress and burnout rates, with many SEN teachers leaving the profession within a decade, leading to a shortage of qualified professionals and diminished quality of SEN programs. The study used a quantitative approach, surveying 11 SEN teachers to identify the primary challenges they face. Key findings highlight widespread misconceptions about SEN teaching, insufficient support from parents and colleagues, and the difficulty of balancing instructional and non-instructional tasks. Teachers reported difficulties handling multiple disabilities and maintaining inclusive environments, often without adequate resources or professional development. This initial analysis emphasizes the need for targeted support systems, including specialized resources and structured professional development, to alleviate the burdens on SEN teachers. By addressing these challenges, policymakers can enhance educational inclusivity and improve the learning environment for students with special needs. This study serves as a foundation for further research and policy recommendations aimed at fostering a more supportive, inclusive community in Santa Elena.

Keywords: SEN, teaching, challenges, inclusion

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el panorama cambiante de la educación inclusiva en Ecuador, centrándose en los desafíos que enfrentan los maestros de educación especial (NEE), especialmente en la región de Santa Elena. El Ministerio de Educación de Ecuador ha adoptado políticas de educación inclusiva para apoyar a los estudiantes con diversas necesidades físicas, cognitivas y socioemocionales. Sin embargo, los maestros de NEE enfrentan desafíos sustanciales, como la gestión de aulas con diversas discapacidades, apoyo institucional limitado, responsabilidades no instructivas y falta de reconocimiento público. Estos obstáculos contribuyen a altas tasas de estrés y agotamiento y muchos maestros de NEE abandonan la profesión en una década, lo que lleva a una escasez de profesionales calificados y una disminución de la calidad de los programas de NEE. El estudio utilizó un enfoque cuantitativo, con 11 maestros de NEE para identificar los principales desafíos que enfrentan. Los hallazgos clave destacan conceptos erróneos generalizados sobre la enseñanza de NEE, apoyo insuficiente de los padres y colegas y la dificultad de equilibrar las tareas instructivas y no instructivas. Los maestros comunicaron dificultades para manejar discapacidades múltiples y mantener entornos inclusivos, a menudo sin recursos adecuados o desarrollo profesional. Este análisis inicial destaca la necesidad de contar con sistemas de apoyo específicos, que incluyan recursos especializados y desarrollo profesional estructurado, para aliviar la carga que pesa sobre los docentes con necesidades educativas especiales. Al abordar estos desafíos, los responsables de las políticas pueden mejorar la inclusión educativa y el entorno de aprendizaje para los estudiantes con necesidades especiales. Este estudio sirve como base para futuras investigaciones y recomendaciones de políticas destinadas a fomentar una comunidad más solidaria e inclusiva en Santa Elena.

Palabras claves: NEE, docencia, desafíos, inclusión

INTRODUCTION

The Ecuadorian educational landscape is evolving towards inclusion, with an increasing emphasis on curricular adaptations for students with special educational support and assistance, “the term children with special educational needs (SEN) refers to highly diverse populations of children with a wide range of physical, cognitive, and socioemotional disabilities or difficulties as well as strengths and resources causing them to require varying degrees of special educational support” (Dalgaard et al., 2022).

Nowadays, schools are demanded to define practices to accommodate students with special education needs. In a world where every child has a right to education without discrimination, it follows many international accords that recognize the rights of students with SEN and decades of international discussion. (Brussino, O.,2020)

A special needs classroom often includes students with a wide range of disabilities, such as autism, dyslexia, cerebral palsy, and Down syndrome, making it challenging to adapt instruction to each student's specific requirements. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are helpful in addressing these needs by outlining personalized strategies for each student. Additionally, teachers can use flexible teaching approaches, incorporating auditory, visual, and kinesthetic methods to accommodate various learning styles. (Bachtsis et al., 2024)

In Ecuador, educational inclusion is a public policy implemented by the Ministry of Education (2022) in various settings. It is a practice aimed at integrating and supporting students with different needs or who, for various reasons, are at a disadvantage or have been excluded. Through this, the Ministry ensures their right to a quality education.

The regulations define the Department of Educational Inclusion (DEI) as a unit of professionals responsible for providing psycho-pedagogical support to the educational community in the teaching-learning process for students with specific educational needs not related to disabilities. This staff complements the work of the UDAI, which, in accordance with the current law, focuses specifically on students with specific educational needs related to disabilities. This new structure of teams dedicated to educational inclusion strengthens the mechanisms for timely support and guidance throughout students' academic journeys. (Ministerio de Educación, 2022)

However, this is not enough. It is important to consider the students' families. Most previous studies focused on parents' perspectives regarding the behavior of their special needs children during the COVID-19 lockdown. Parents observed increased anxiety, nervousness, frustration, and concentration issues in their children, with some reporting more crying, eating, and screen time. In Spain, children with special needs showed more nervousness, anger, and sadness, while in Scotland, parents noted problems with sleep, eating, and reduced physical activity.

Although the sudden school closures caused anxiety in many children, some benefited from the absence of stress from in-person learning. However, challenges arose with online learning, including technological difficulties and overwhelming workloads, highlighting the need for better collaboration and communication between parents and teachers. (Bachtsis et al., 2024)

Special education teachers experience higher levels of burnout compared to many other professions. Various challenges contribute to this, often leading teachers to leave their positions. It is estimated that 75% of those teaching special needs students will leave within ten years of beginning their careers.

This high turnover results in a shortage of special education teachers and a decline in the quality of programs available to students. Although many special education teachers begin their careers with the goal of helping students with disabilities integrate into society, they encounter numerous obstacles that make achieving this goal very difficult. (Dimitrellou & Male, 2019)

Special education teachers also encounter a lack of institutional support, with shrinking budgets and increasing responsibilities in many school districts. This includes handling classrooms with students who have multiple disabilities, requiring individualized instruction and care.

Moreover, in inclusive classrooms, teachers must balance the needs of students with and without disabilities, addressing issues like bullying and fostering a respectful environment. These challenges, coupled with professional isolation, lack of parental support, and difficulties in managing behavioral issues, make the role of a special education teacher exceptionally demanding.

According to Tjentz and Tjentz (2022) people mistakenly believe that teaching is a simple task, failing to acknowledge the complexities and responsibilities involved, especially for special education teachers. These educators face unique challenges, as they work with students who have various disabilities, making their job even more difficult.

Despite the significant demands placed on them, special education teachers often receive little public recognition or support. Additionally, they are burdened with non-instructional duties, such as attending meetings, conducting assessments, and managing large amounts of paperwork, all of which take them away from their primary role of teaching.

The intention of this paper is to identify the challenges of being a special education teacher. The objectives of this research will focus on:

- 1) To find out the extent of stress resource teachers undergo in the schools where they are employed.
- 2) To recognize various challenges teachers face in supporting students and families with special education needs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a quantitative research approach and employed a survey method to gather data from a sample of 11 teachers working in various schools. All of them shared the characteristics of working with students with especial education needs. Information was collected through personal interviews, utilizing a questionnaire titled "Questionnaire on Challenges Faced by SEN (Special Educational Needs) Teachers." This tool consisted of 22 items, each presenting a challenge with a simple "Yes" or "No" response option.

Teachers were instructed to carefully read each item and mark whether it was a challenge for them. The collected data was analyzed using percentage analysis to determine the extent of the challenges faced by resource teachers in inclusive schools. The questionnaire and the results were grouped in seven categories, but four of them are reported in this study as they were chosen for this theme directly. This study is based on the previous research performed by Johns and Shahul (2020) but in this case, it was applied to Ecuadorian, British, and Cuban teachers working in inclusive schools in Santa Elena province, Ecuador.

The main topics were the following:

1. Widespread Misperception about Teaching Children With Special Needs (CWSN)
2. Non-Instructional Responsibilities
3. Lack of Support from parents, teachers, and public
4. Dealing with Multiple Disabilities

According to Johns and Shahul (2020), special education teachers experience higher burnout rates compared to most other professions. This burnout stems from various challenges, which often lead to these educators leaving their roles. Studies indicate that approximately 75% of teachers working with special needs students will leave the field within their first decade.

Such high turnover contributes to a shortage of special education teachers and a reduction in quality educational programs for their students. Although many enter the profession with the aim of supporting disabled students in becoming active contributors to society, they encounter obstacles that make this goal hard to achieve. The next section analyzes the main challenges special education teachers face and the results obtained from their perceptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On the first category, teachers were asked about the lack of understanding about teaching children with special needs by teachers, parents and other students; also, on this same section teachers were asked about a possible suppression of negative feelings towards SEN students.

The results obtained were the following:

Table 1*Widespread Misperception about Teaching Children with Special Needs*

No.	Challenge	Yes	No
1	Lack of understanding about teaching children with special needs by teachers, parents and other students	100%	
2	Suppression of negative feelings towards children with special educational needs	90.9%	9.1%

On the first question related to this category, all teachers agreed on evidencing lack of understanding from other teachers, parents, and other students. Odeh and Lach (2024) reported in their study that teachers faced fragile connections between teachers and school staff, along with ineffective communication strategies between parents and teachers. This statement is reaffirmed by this study as teachers must face challenges in understanding the education of children with special needs. Teaching these children is exceptionally demanding and comes with significant responsibilities, yet many overlook the essential role of the teacher.

Ideally, SEN teachers should work closely with general teachers to develop effective teaching strategies, but in practice, they are often left to manage SEN students on their own. There is a common misconception that teaching these students is easier, but in reality, resource teachers put in a great deal of effort to make even small progress. Unfortunately, some parents and other students still view these children negatively, even believing they do not need education. Such attitudes from parents and general teachers make the resource teacher's job even more challenging. (Ballhysa & Flagler, 2011)

The second question reports the results from the question related with the suppression of negative feelings towards children with special educational needs. The 90.9% percent of teachers agreed that there is actually a tendency of ignoring SEN students' feelings in the school environment. Priego-Ojeda and Rusu (2023) discussed that it is expected that parents of children with disabilities would report greater challenges in managing emotions, along with higher levels of parenting stress, conflict between partners, and dissatisfaction in their relationships. Additionally, greater difficulties in emotion regulation would correlate with increased parenting stress, more frequent interparental conflict, and lower relationship satisfaction, with these associations being stronger in families with children with disabilities. For instance, these feelings caused by stress at home are reflected in the school environment.

Parents of children with disabilities may be coping with extra emotional stress or parenting pressure, and this might affect the school climate. Parents holding their emotions and feelings can result in a faulty relationship to educators being pushed or less effective communication, both of which are essential for supporting that child is learning. The same emotional suppression might also alienate families and school staff as well, resulting in parents

feeling on their own or not understood. In addition, suppressed stress and emotions reduce their participation or engagement in school functions or meetings which results into limited support of the child's unique needs. Therefore, these dynamics can lead to fewer resources and less assistive practices or specialized intervention for the student; impacting their educational experience in their future performance. (Woodman et al., 2014)

Table 2

Non-Instructional Responsibilities

No.	Challenge	Yes	No
1	Teaching tasks not related with teaching students with special educational needs	63.6%	36.4%
2	Overload of paperwork and tasks when teaching SEN students	36.4%	63.6%

In this section, findings revealed that more than 60% of interviewed teachers reported having to perform other tasks that are not directly related with their teaching position. CER Education website displays a series of activities not directly related with the teaching process, however they are considered as part of a SEN teacher's routine. These activities are dynamic, involving various instructional and support tasks tailored to students' needs. The teacher starts by reviewing lesson plans and collaborating with staff or specialists. Lessons typically focus on skills like literacy, numeracy, or life skills in small group or one-on-one sessions. They incorporate sensory breaks or physical activities to support students' engagement, using adaptive materials for effective learning. Some SEN teachers supervise lunch, assisting students with eating, socializing, or managing sensory issues in crowded settings.

The teacher collaborates with teaching assistants or specialists, monitors student progress, revises plans, and holds meetings with parents or staff. At the end of the day the time is spent reflecting on the day, preparing resources, and adjusting plans for the next day. (What Is an SEN Teacher? Roles, Skills and Qualifications - CER, 2024)

Also, it was reported that even though paperwork and tasks related with SEN students require to pay closer attention; for instance, they prefer doing it as soon as they are requested to. According to Imhoff (2012), teachers with four or fewer years of experience in special day classes report that the large number of students in their classrooms adds to their paperwork load and creates stress, reducing the time and energy they have left for family, home, and social activities outside of school.

Table 3*SEN Teachers' Lack of Support from Parents, Other Teachers, and Public in General*

No.	Challenge	Yes	No
1	Need to work in networks with similar teachers	90.9%	9.1%
2	Support from parents	72.7%	27.3%
3	Do you have a support team at school?	45.5%	54.5%
4	Collaboration between special education teachers and regular teachers	63.6%	36.4%
5	Do you think there is a lack of recognition from the public for your teaching work with students with special educational needs?	90.9%	9.1%

Results prove that there is an urgent need for SEN teachers to have a support group from experts, colleagues, and others who are involved directly or indirectly face the same challenges and learn from them. Højberg and Jeppesen (2011) created a network for students with special needs. Teachers, parents, other professionals, and family were invited to participate.

The study showed that creating networks, especially through seminars and particularly for teachers, is important. Different groups participated in these networks in varying ways, but conventional school teachers found it hard to join due to time constraints. With this, it is proven that other teachers may see reluctant to be involved with their peers and SEN students' families.

There was also a strong need for more knowledge, and parents wished that teachers were more informed. While joining networks doesn't directly improve students' academic abilities, sharing experiences can help find better solutions to complex challenges.

Table 4*Dealing with Multiple Disabilities*

No.	Challenge	Yes	No
1	Do you identify yourself as an effective teacher?	100%	
2	Do you have a large number of students in your class?	27.3%	72.7%
3	Are you able to address the various problems of students?	72.7%	27.3%
4	Do you have time to meet all the needs of students with special needs?	63.6%	36.4%

According to Nketsia and Saloviita (2013) as a teacher, it is impossible to meet the needs of every student in a classroom, even more especially with SEN students. Even though regular teachers would be introduced with already prepared and printed learning/teaching materials, SEN teachers would encounter a challenge to find adequate resources to plan and have students to practice in class.

Teachers in inclusive classrooms try their best as they know they have an unbalance and very disperse group of students. Interviewed teachers reported giving their 100% to be the best

teacher for their “regular” and SEN students. However, they reported having to face many challenges related with other tasks than the “regular” teaching ones, including facing large groups, attending various (and diverse) problems at the same time, and finally trying to cope with meeting all SEN students’ needs.

Nketsia and Saloviita (2013) in their study presented the challenges that SEN teachers would face in providing support to their students in inclusive classrooms:

Identification of SEN: The detection of a “not regular” student after observing, testing, and reporting, as well as making referrals to go appropriate places for readdress of children’s problem, or seek assistance from SEN coordinators for the child.

Acceptance of SEN pupils: Trying their best to support and include their SEN pupils to a welcoming and positive environment is an extra responsibility for these teachers.

Classroom Management: The need to have a controllable class size is important for an effective classroom management, so that SEN teachers would provide individualized attention and prompt feedback to each student.

Lack of skills: The adaptation of curriculum to particular SEN demands cause teachers to create extra materials to focus different approaches at the same time.

Inadequate Infrastructure: Having limitations in the physical space and in the provision of technical/technological support for SEN students may become overwhelming to teachers.

All of these factors contribute to a quick burnout of teachers who work in inclusive classrooms. A study from Vanderbilt University points out that SEN teaching has become a mix of dispersed, sometimes chaotic duties. Beyond the already demanding task of managing the classroom, the high volume of paperwork, worksheets, curricular adaptations, and limitations in physical spaces and technological devices can overwhelm even the most dedicated teachers. This overload leads to burnout, and since special educators need significant energy to support learning, it is essential to structure these roles without adding unnecessary stress. (Teaching Channel, 2023)

CONCLUSIONS

At this point it is important to emphasize the difference between Segregation and Inclusion, together with the tasks, responsibilities, and challenges teachers must face to incorporate and change the perspectives among these two terms. In the past, people with learning disabilities were often kept out of regular schools and economic and social life. Similarly, people with sensory or physical disabilities were also excluded from society. Sometimes, this separation led to extreme actions like forced sterilization or imprisonment. These actions were based on wrong ideas about physical and mental differences. The belief that disabled people should be separated came from the mistaken idea that all human should meet certain standards.

The idea of integrating students with special needs into regular schools has long been discussed. This issue has led to the concept of inclusion, which brings together different ideas

about the role and purpose of schools. Inclusion means changing regular schools so they can support every student, no matter their abilities, and ensuring each student feels part of one community. The focus of inclusion is more on values, based on the idea of human rights and the belief that any form of separation is wrong. (Wang, 2009)

For instance, the intention of SEN teachers in the peninsula of Santa Elena trying to fully integrate and support every student has been discussed in this study. The results demonstrated that challenges SEN teachers face are related with misconceptions, lack of support from peers and society, as well as the manageable workload of paperwork and possible burnout in consequence of dealing with multiple groups of “regular” and “special needs” students. Finally, this study sets a conducting an initial analysis of the challenges faced by SEN teachers in the Península de Santa Elena is crucial in order to create the basis for long-term improvements in the educational experience of both SEN teachers and their students.

Analyzing the challenges faced by SEN teachers in Santa Elena is essential due to the region's unique educational, social, and cultural factors. Identifying these challenges, such as limited access to resources and training, can help school leaders design better support systems for SEN teachers, including professional development and specialized resources. This also promotes a more inclusive environment for students with special needs by highlighting areas where schools may need restructuring or add more resources. This initial analysis provides a foundation for policy recommendations and raises awareness among stakeholders, fostering a community that values and supports inclusive education.

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