

## SPED teachers' experiences in distance learning modalities in IBA division of Zambales

Mas, Analyn M.

*Northern Zambales College, Inc., Philippines*

Echaure, Jessie S. ✉

*Northern Zambales College, Inc., Philippines* ([jessieechaure48@gmail.com](mailto:jessieechaure48@gmail.com))

Ragob, Brenda V.

*Northern Zambales College, Inc., Philippines*

Anulao, Jessa R.

*Northern Zambales College, Inc., Philippines*

Echon, Kyla Pearl A.

*Northern Zambales College, Inc., Philippines*



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### ***Abstract***

This qualitative case study explored the lived experiences of special education teachers in delivering instruction during the Covid-19 pandemic through distance learning modalities. Using thematic analysis, the study captured teachers' perspectives on challenges, advantages, disadvantages, and sustaining factors. Five themes emerged: (1) teaching experiences marked by fear, anxiety, and overwhelming responsibilities; (2) blended, modular, and online modalities offering flexibility but exposing inequities; (3) advantages such as accessibility contrasted with disadvantages including unreliable assessments and parental limitations; (4) parent-teacher feedback as a vital assessment tool; and (5) altruism, commitment, and passion sustaining teachers despite challenges. Findings highlight the resilience and advocacy of special education teachers and underscore the need for equitable support systems and strong parent-teacher collaboration in remote learning contexts.

***Keywords:*** COVID-19, special education, distance learning, case study, remote learning, IEP monitoring, teacher altruism

## **SPED teachers' experiences in distance learning modalities in IBA division of Zambales**

### **1. Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education worldwide, forcing schools to adapt remote modalities. The global outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) that began in December 2019 precipitated an unprecedented disruption to education systems worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020, and many countries instituted emergency public-health measures that included prolonged school closures. In the Philippines, the first confirmed case was reported on January 30, 2020, and by mid-March 2020 (DOH, 2020) the national government imposed an enhanced community quarantine over Luzon, closing schools and shifting instruction away from traditional classrooms. These rapid changes forced educators, families, and policymakers to adopt distance learning modalities—synchronous and asynchronous online instruction, modular print materials, and home-based approaches—often with little preparation or resources.

With the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic-induced shift in education, special education teachers were thrust into uncharted territory of delivering special education remotely. Sped teachers now must teach, and students with disabilities now must learn, through any of these distance learning modalities: online synchronous, online asynchronous, digital offline modular, and homebased print modular. The use of distance learning modalities in teaching students with disabilities posed a unique challenge for sped teachers questioning whether the brick-and-mortar face-to-face special education setting can be transformed into a distance education setting.

Special education simply cannot be done virtually or through self-learning modules. According to Vygotsky, Mcleod (2025) a genuinely differentiated learning environment is required to develop higher psychological functions and the overall personality of a child with a disability. Students with disabilities should be provided with a differentiated curriculum, specially trained teachers, special auxiliary means, and more time to learn. For this precise reason, sped teachers became excessively worried for a whole subset of students with disabilities who they believe will not benefit from any of the distance learning modalities. Special education in the Philippines is guided by national policies such as Republic Act No. 11650 and DepEd Order No. 74, which enshrine the right of learners with disabilities to inclusive, equitable, and quality education. However, the pandemic exposed and exacerbated longstanding systemic inequities, including resource gaps, insufficient teacher training, and limited access to assistive technology—particularly in rural and low-income communities. The sudden pivot to remote modalities forced Special education teachers to adapt their pedagogical strategies, assessment practices, and communication protocols, often with minimal institutional support or professional development.

For special education teachers, this transition posed unique challenges, as individualized instruction and close monitoring are central to supporting learners with disabilities. This study sought to capture the essence of special education teachers' lived experiences during this unprecedented shift, focusing on their struggles, coping mechanisms, and advocacy for their students. Moreover, to provide contextual insights into how the case study approach reveals the unique realities of SPED teachers in Zambales, thereby contributing to the limited body of literature on special education practices during crises in the Philippine setting. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a sudden shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to distance learning, creating profound implications for special education. This study is anchored on the idea that special education programs must be responsive to the unique needs of students with disabilities, and that instructional delivery must be adapted to ensure equity and continuity of learning.

**Rationale** - This study is significant as it documents the lived experiences of special education teachers in Iba District, Division of Zambales during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering rare insights into how distance learning modalities affected inclusive education. The findings highlight the challenges and coping strategies of teachers, the struggles of learners with special education needs, and the critical role of parents in supporting home-based

learning. For school administrators, the study provides evidence to guide resource allocation and professional development, while future researchers can build upon its methodology and contextual findings to further explore resilience and equity in special education during crises.

**Research objectives** - This study aims to explore and document the lived experiences of special education (SPED) teachers in the District of Iba, Division of Zambales, Philippines, as they navigated the challenges of delivering special education services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the objectives are: To describe the lived experiences of SPED teachers in Amungan Elementary School and Iba Central Elementary School in delivering special education through distance learning modalities during the pandemic. To identify the perceived advantages and disadvantages of using various distance learning modalities (e.g., online synchronous, asynchronous, modular print) in teaching students with disabilities.

## 2. Research methodology and design

**Research Design** - This study employed a qualitative case study design Creswell (2013). grounded in a paradigm to capture the lived experiences of special education teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic. The case study approach was chosen for its ability to provide an in-depth, contextualized understanding of complex, real-life phenomena (Crowe et al., 2011). Thematic analysis is consistent with Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) conceptualization of qualitative research, which holds that "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" A thematic analysis might focus on similarities or differences in repeated patterns found within the dataset.

**Participants and Sampling** - The sample included eight teachers, reflecting diversity in teaching tenure, specialization, and geographic location. This sample size aligns with qualitative research standards for achieving data saturation and depth of insight. Eight (8) SPED teachers served as respondents: five (5) from Amungan Elementary School and three (3) from Iba Central Elementary School. These teachers were selected because they were directly involved in implementing distance learning modalities for students with disabilities during the pandemic. This study was conducted in public elementary schools with Special Education (SPED) programs in the Iba District of Zambales, specifically Amungan Elementary School and Iba Central Elementary School. A total of eight (8) SPED teacher-respondents participated in the study, representing the combined population of SPED teachers from these schools.

**Table 1**

*Distribution of Teacher Respondents*

Name of School	Number of Teacher Respondent
Amungan Elementary School	5
Iba Elementary School	3
Total Number of Teacher Respondent	8

**Instrument** - The primary instrument used was the Davis and Kalvin (2021) Research Questionnaire titled "Teaching Special Education in the Midst of COVID-19: Current Conditions of Delivering Special Education Services During Distance Learning." The questionnaire consisted of two parts: (1) Informed consent section – ensuring voluntary participation and ethical compliance. (2) Interview questions section – designed to elicit detailed responses about teachers' experiences. In addition, the researchers themselves served as key instruments in the case study, conducting focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Guided interview questions were validated for qualitative research, and probing questions were asked based on participants' comments rather than pre-existing theories.

**Data Gathering Procedures** - Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, conducted both virtually and face-to-face in accordance with Covid-19 protocols. Interview questions were open-ended covering topics such as teaching experiences, assessment practices, advantages and disadvantages of distance modalities, and sources of professional motivation. With participants' written consent, sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in the original language (Filipino/English), and translated into

English for analysis. Transcripts were checked for accuracy and consistency throughout the process. The researchers secured permission from the school administrators and obtained informed consent from the teacher-respondents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via online platforms (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet) and, where possible, face-to-face sessions following health protocols. Documentation and responses were recorded, transcribed, and organized for analysis. Researchers consciously set aside biases, immersed themselves in the data, and incorporated direct quotations to preserve authenticity and contextual meaning. By focusing on teacher narratives, the study sought to uncover themes related to instructional challenges, coping mechanisms, and the impact of distance learning modalities on special education.

**Data Analysis** - Data analysis followed a thematic approach, focusing on identifying recurring patterns and themes in teacher responses. Interview transcripts were reviewed, coded, and interpreted to uncover meaningful structures in the lived experiences of SPED teachers. Rubin and Rubin (2012) emphasize the importance of conversational guidelines to keep interviews focused, while Husserlian phenomenology (Welch & Barr, 2017) guided the researchers in capturing authentic lived experiences through active listening and observation. Unstructured interviews, as suggested by Vagle (2016), were also employed to elicit rich, descriptive accounts beyond structured questioning. This methodology ensures that the study captures the depth and complexity of SPED teachers' experiences during the pandemic, while adhering to ethical standards and maintaining rigor in qualitative research.

### 3. Results and discussion

Thematic analysis of the data yielded five interrelated themes that encapsulate the lived experiences of special education teachers with distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 2**  
*The Emerging Themes of the Study*

Theme	Core Sub-Themes	Key Focus
Teaching Experiences During Covid 19 Pandemic	Challenging Fear/Anxiety Overwhelming Responsibilities	Emotional and workload impacts of the pandemic
Modalities	Modular Online Blended	Delivery formats teachers use
Advantages and Disadvantages	Strengths Weaknesses	Pedagogical affordances and limitations of distance learning
Assessment	IEP Monitoring Unreliable Assessment Teachers and Parents feedback	How progress was documented and perceived validity of measures
Altruism	Advocacy Commitment Passion	Teachers' advocacy and relational work on behalf of students

**Theme 1:** Teaching Experiences During COVID-19 Pandemic — Challenging, Anxiety and Overwhelming Responsibilities.

Teachers described heightened fear and anxiety about students' wellbeing and about meeting professional obligations remotely. Many reported overwhelming responsibilities as they adapted materials, learned platforms, and increased family communication. Despite strain, a pervasive commitment and passion for students motivated sustained effort.

T4 said "*As a SPED Teacher, we have to adjust on the new learning set-up wherein we are going to adapt the modular and at the same time the online*". While, ...

*"It is inconvenient because there is no communication between the teacher and the child. We're not sure of the learning progress of the learners."* T2

T5 wrote “*afraid to come to school during the pandemic*”. While, ...

*“The most challenging part is for the parents especially on how they teach their children at home with special needs during pandemic.” T1*

**Theme 2: Modalities —Blended, Modular, and Online Formats**

Teachers shifted among blended synchronous/asynchronous routines, modular paper-based packets for families without reliable internet, and fully online instruction when feasible. Modality selection was pragmatic and responsive to student access, family capacity, and IEP requirements.

*“for now, we are using the blended learning modalities wherein we are having the printed and at the same time online monitoring, yung tatlo lang actually out of 15 yung na online monitor namin kasi sila lang may means of communication, stable yung internet and at the same time we can't provide load po para sa aming online monitoring. 3 out of 15 is blended learning tapos ung 12 out of 15 is modular printed na sya.” T4*

*“Modules po ang pinaka basic na ginamit ng SPED “Modular and with the help of the parents, kasi hindi rin kakayanin ng mga kids' kung wala yung parents, bale Guided Modular Distance Learning Modality.” T1*

*“We tried online for the kids but hindi siya for the kids. Let's say our kids with Autism ang screentime lang nila is 5 minutes after 5 minutes wala na silang concentration, attention and focus. T1*

**Theme 3: Advantages and Disadvantages — Pedagogical Trade-offs and Equity Concerns**

Participants identified strengths such as increased family involvement and opportunities for individualized materials, and weaknesses including limited hands-on instruction and reduced peer interaction.

*“Nagkaroon kami ng advantage dito na maexplain namin yung kakayahan ng anak nila don sa paraan kung paano namin inaapproach yung anak nila sa school.” Mas more time na naeexplore ng parents yung kids nila, mas natututukan ng parents yun kids nila.” T2*

*“1. self-phase learning 2. they can save money for the transportation 3.it promotes the family and school partnerships so mas ndedevelop yung relationship ng parents and the school nagkaroon ng collaboration ng dahil dito sa pandemic”. T4*

*“Sa deaf & mute kasi namin nagsisign na kami ng Alphabet nung 2019, marunong na siya ng animals, magsign ng numbers, pero kasi nagka covid ngayon, dahil nga nung start palang ng pandemic halos ang internet connection din natin ay hindi stable, so na stop yung learning ng bata na instead alam niya na yun alphabet, alam niya na yung numbers, yung animals, na stop na naman kami don. So, pagbalik ng face to face back to zero nanaman kami” T1*

*“lack of interaction, walang say si teacher kung tama ba o mali yung ginagawa as long as ginagawa lang nung bata yung module okay lang kaya okay na disadvantage sa part ng parent kasi pag face to face iiwan nalang si anak, bahala na si teacher eh noong nagka pandemic sila yung kukuha, sila yung magfafacilitate ng learning, additional burden din yung activity sa mga part ng parent yung validity nung sa module na hindi ko alam as a teacher if yung bata ba talaga yung gumagawa nung activity.” T4*

**Theme 4: Assessment — Individualized Education Program (IEP) Monitoring and Concerns about Reliability**

Assessment practices shifted toward family-mediated evidence and observational data gathered from modules collected. Teachers described intensive efforts to maintain IEP monitoring while expressing that many remote

measures felt unreliable for validly capturing student skills. Parent feedback became a critical source of information.

*“Merong IEP, yung IEP kasi nakabase doon yung gagawin ng student, halimbawa nasa ABC's palang siya or 1-10 yun yung ipapagawa mo sa student hanggang sa mamaster niya, so yung IEP yun yung baseline namin kung paano kami gagawa ng modules para sa kids, pina follow up ko yung parents. T1*

*“ang ginawa namin na remedy is yung sa online assessment so isa isa namin silang tinawagan with the permission of the parents and assistance for them para yung sa strength and weaknesses nung bata ma assess namin para yung mga kailangan talaga nilang idevelop ay yun ang mailagay namin sa IEP.” T4*

*“Meron din po kasi kaming IEP yun po yung monitoring po namin sa kanila na printed po, IEP monitoring. Sinasagutan nila tapos iba pa po yung tatawag pa sa kanila, para po alam din namin na yung pinasa nilang IEP monitoring ay tutugma po sa sagot nila sa online.” T7& T8*

*“May mga bata parin talagang hindi sila yung sumasagot ng module. Pagdating dito makikita yung mga sasagutan yung module nila minsan walang sagot o hindi talaga nila nasasagutan, meron din naman pong natatapos nila pero hindi po kasi tayo certain kung sila po yung sumasagot ng module nila”. T3*

*Nakita ko yung mga module nung mga bata sulat talaga ng parent hindi sya sulat ng bata”.T2*

*“Mommy pasend naman ako ng picture ni ganito, anong ginagawa niya ngayon, ay ma'am marunong na siyang magset ng table, very good, Mommy kamusta po si John Mark? Ma'am nagluluto na po siya ng itlog” T1*

*“from time to time, tinatawagan pa rin kung tapos na ba yung learning modules, kung hindi pa rin sige po bigyan ko po kayo ng time, pinafollow up lang siya, pero hindi naman naming maforce yung bata na gumawa ng module at yung parent”T4*

#### **Theme 5: Altruism — Advocacy, Partnership, and Expanded Roles**

A strong ethic of altruism underpinned teachers' actions. Teachers acted as advocates to secure resources, extended roles to coach caregivers, and strengthened teacher-parent partnerships to sustain learning. This advocacy often required additional emotional labor and time. verbatim quotes that demonstrate advocacy and partnership work.

*“My god given advocacy na hopefully if I could teach these kids, hopefully if I educate them, they would be better, they would be good and they would be functional, it's advocacy, yung alam mo sa puso mo na you wanted to do this, you know in your heart, I'm more than blessed, to have the kids in SPed. T1*

*“Kailangan mag proceed lang kahit na mahirap maraming challenges pero kailangan go lang ng go, kasi hindi naman pwedeng maiwan yung mga studyante natin diba especially the Sped students so ano lang push lang ng push, mahirap pero kaya yan in God's perfect time lahat naman makakaya natin basta para sa mga bata, para sa bayan thank you. Ikaw yung masasaktan para sa kanila especially if may discrimination.”T4*

*“Syempre po, unang una para po sa kanila talaga, bukod po sa magulang nila, sino po ang tutulong sa kanila para po makapag-aral, tayo din po na teacher kaya sabi nga natin diba para sa bata, kaya kahit anuman yung ano kahit modular man siya o online class or face to face tayo ngayon, ituloy parin natin na turuan natin sila.” T7& T8*

#### 4. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped teaching experiences, intensifying emotional strain and workload while demanding rapid adaptation to remote modalities. Teachers' balanced anxiety over student wellbeing with practical burdens of individualized module creation, distribution, monitoring, and family communication. Despite these pressures, they demonstrated persistent commitment and altruism, extending roles to advocacy and caregiver coaching. Modalities were chosen pragmatically: blended routines where possible, modular paper packets in low-connectivity contexts, and online formats for students with stable access. Decisions were driven by equity concerns, family capacity, and IEP requirements rather than pedagogical preference. Assessment relied on family-mediated evidence and adapted IEP monitoring tools. Teachers expressed concern about validity, noting instances where parents completed work for students. Teachers extended their roles beyond instruction, advocating for resources, coaching caregivers, and sustaining student access. This altruistic work required additional time and emotional labor, reflecting deep commitment to student inclusion and functionality.

#### 5. Conclusion

The study highlights the resilience and advocacy of special education teachers, underscoring the need for equitable support systems and strong parent-teacher collaboration in remote learning contexts. This qualitative case study captured the lived experiences of special education teachers who delivered instruction through distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thematic analysis produced five interrelated themes—Teaching Experiences During COVID-19, Modalities, Advantages and Disadvantages, Assessment, and Altruism—that together describe how teachers navigated an abrupt, resource-constrained shift to remote special education. Overall, special education teachers demonstrated adaptive agency—improvising, reframing, and leveraging relationships to maintain learning continuity. However, the sustainability and equity of these adaptations were limited by structural constraints, unreliable assessment practices, and caregiver capacity gaps.

**Recommendations** - The study's findings add to the body of knowledge by having practical and educational implications. The COVID-19 experience showed that remote special education must be strengthened through four coordinated actions. First, curriculum developers and implementers need to develop and pilot reliable remote assessment measures aligned with IEP goals, testing them across diverse learners and training staff in standardized administration. Second, launch targeted parent training and support—modular guides, live coaching, and peer networks—to equip caregivers as effective co-educators. Third, ensure equitable access to technology and adapted materials by providing devices, connectivity, assistive tools, and technical help. Finally, fund family-centered research that documents parents' and students' lived experiences and uses findings to refine assessments, training, and resource allocation for continuous improvement.

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