



Voices of Strength: A Phenomenological Study of Parental Experiences in Raising Children with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

Raising a child with special needs presents both profound joys and significant challenges for parents and guardians, encompassing emotional, financial, and social dimensions. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of parents raising children with special needs in Tacurong City using a phenomenological research design. Data were collected from five parents representing children in Grades 7 to 11 to capture diverse perspectives and provide an authentic understanding of caregiving realities. The findings revealed that parents and guardians encounter multifaceted challenges that affect their emotional well-being, financial stability, and daily routines. They experience emotional stress, psychological adjustments, and practical difficulties arising from medical care, therapy, and balancing work with caregiving responsibilities. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience, unwavering commitment, and deep love for their children, which serve as motivating factors in their caregiving roles. The study also highlighted the sources of strength that parents rely on to manage caregiving demands, including spiritual faith, family support, personal resilience, and a strong sense of responsibility toward their children. Faith and prayer provided emotional stability, while family members offered practical and emotional assistance, enabling parents to persevere in fulfilling their roles. Furthermore, participants emphasized the need for programs that address the diverse needs of children with special needs and their families. These programs should integrate financial support, inclusive and specialized education, skill and talent development, and community collaboration. Initiatives such as therapy services, specialized classrooms, trained teachers, and skill-development programs in music, arts, and vocational training were identified as crucial for fostering independence, confidence, and social inclusion. The findings underscore the importance of holistic, multi-dimensional support systems that empower both children and their families. Effective interventions extend beyond educational programs to include social, financial, and community-based resources that strengthen family resilience and promote inclusive development.

Keywords: resilience, caregiving, inclusion, empowerment



INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

Raising a child is one of the most meaningful yet challenging roles a parent can experience. For parents of children with special needs, this responsibility often brings not only love and pride but also unique emotional, financial, and social challenges. These parents encountered complex emotional, social, and educational challenges in nurturing and supporting their children's development.

International research on parental experiences highlights that caregiving for children with special needs involves multifaceted roles that extend beyond physical care to include advocacy, emotional resilience, and navigating educational and social support systems (Baldonado et al., 2025). Many studies document parents' efforts to balance care responsibilities, cope with stigma, and seek inclusive services, revealing both the transformative growth and the persistent systemic barriers that families face globally. Despite the breadth of international literature, there remains a need for deeper phenomenological inquiries that capture the *essence of lived experiences* from diverse cultural settings, particularly in underrepresented regions where contextual influences shape unique narratives of strength and struggle (Arabis-Quijote et al., 2023).

In the Philippines, local studies further illustrate involvement of families in their children's educational journeys and the influence of family attributes on academic outcomes for learners with special educational needs (Bendijo et al., 2025; Estojero, 2022), emphasizing the significance of parental engagement and support structures in inclusive education. Yet, much of this research leans toward descriptive or correlational approaches, leaving a gap in interpretive accounts of how parents make meaning of their roles, cope with stressors, and navigate day - to-day challenges within Filipino sociocultural realities.

Specifically, in South Central Mindanao and Sultan Kudarat, limited qualitative work exists that foregrounds parental voices in contexts of varied access to services, cultural perceptions of disability, and localized support systems (Arabis - Quijote et al., 2023). Addressing this gap, the present study centers on the voices of strength among parents raising children with special needs in Sultan Kudarat, seeking to provide rich, experience-based insights that contribute to inclusive policy and practice.



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Aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—notably SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education and SDG 3 on good health and well-being—this study aims to deepen understanding of parental experiences to support more responsive educational and community interventions.

Ultimately, the goal of the study is to explore and interpret the lived experiences of parents raising children with special needs, identifying themes of resilience, coping mechanisms, and perceived support systems that can inform stakeholders in education, health, and social services toward more family-centered inclusive practices (Baldonado et al., 2025; Bendijo et al., 2025).

Research Questions

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following central question:

1. What are the lived experiences of parents in raising children with special needs?
2. What coping strategies and sources of strength do parents rely on in managing their daily responsibilities and struggles?
3. What program can be done to address the needs of children with special needs and their families?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study was grounded in a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of parents raising children with special needs. Phenomenology focuses on capturing the essence of a phenomenon, emphasizing participants' perceptions, meanings, emotions, and interpretations of their everyday realities.

Further, phenomenology is particularly appropriate for this study because it allowed researchers to go beyond surface-level descriptions and access the deeper structures of lived experience. As emphasized by Clark Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research sought to describe the essence of experience through systematic reflection on participants' accounts, while



John W. Creswell (2013) highlighted that phenomenology was best suited for studies that aimed to understand how individuals constructed meaning from a shared phenomenon. This approach justified the design of the study, as it prioritized participants’ subjective realities and provided a comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences as parents of children with special needs.

Participants of the Study

Table 1 displays the qualifications of the participants based on the criteria set by the researcher prior to the selection of qualified informants of the study.

Table 1

Participants’ Inclusion Criteria

Qualifications
Participants: 5 parents/ caregiver
<p>1.. Being a Biological Parent or Primary Caregiver. A biological parent refers to an individual who shares a genetic relationship with a child and assumes the role of nurturing, guiding, and supporting the child’s growth and development. Primary caregivers whether biological parents or otherwise play a critical role in navigating challenges, implementing care strategies, and fostering resilience, making their experiences central to understanding the phenomenon under study.</p> <p>2.. Having a child is with special needs officially identified by the school or health professionals. Refers to the situation in which a school or qualified health professional has formally recognized that a child requires additional support due to developmental, cognitive, behavioral, physical, or learning challenges.</p> <p>3.. Willingness to participate in the study. Participants must voluntarily agree to take part in the study, provide consent for their narratives to be analyzed, and share their insights regarding parental experiences in raising children with special needs.</p>

The primary respondents were five parents or primary caregivers of children with special needs enrolled at Tacurong National High School. Inclusion criteria were being a biological



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parent or primary caregiver, having a child with special needs identified by the school or health professionals, and being willing to participate in the study.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select parents directly involved in caregiving, ensuring experienced respondents. For qualitative interviews, purposive sampling with maximum variation was used to select a diverse subset of about five parents based on variables such as child's age, type of special need, and parental coping level to ensure depth and breadth in data (Dela Cruz, 2025).

Research Instruments

To capture the rich, personal experiences of parents raising children with special needs, this study used semi-structured interview guides as the primary data-gathering instrument. The interview guide was thoughtfully designed to allow participants to share their stories in their own words while ensuring that key topics such as challenges, coping strategies, and emotional experiences were addressed. The semi-structured format provided a balance: it offered a consistent framework for all participants while remaining flexible enough to explore unexpected insights that arose during the conversation. This approach enabled the researcher to ask probing follow-up questions, clarify responses, and adapt to each participant's pace and comfort level. Additionally, field notes and observational memos complemented the interviews.

These notes recorded non-verbal cues, emotional expressions, and contextual details that enriched the understanding of the participants' experiences. Together, the interviews and field notes formed a comprehensive instrument for capturing the depth and complexity of parental experiences in raising children with special needs.

According to Moustakas (1994), in phenomenological research, the choice of instrument is not merely technical; it is relational. The researcher becomes a co-explorer, engaging with participants' experiences with empathy and openness, ensuring that their voices are heard authentically.

Data Gathering Procedure

In this study, the data gathering procedure focused on listening to the authentic voices of parents who are raising children with special needs. The researcher personally reached out to the participants and built trust before conducting the interviews.



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After obtaining their consent, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were scheduled at a time and place that made the participants feel comfortable and respected. This process allowed them to share their experiences openly, without fear of judgment or pressure. Each interview was guided by questions that encouraged the parents to reflect on their daily challenges, coping strategies, and emotional journeys. The conversations were audio-recorded (with permission) and later transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy and integrity of their words. Field notes were also taken to capture the researcher's observations, emotions, and insights during the interviews.

The researcher employed purposive sampling to select parents directly involved in caregiving, ensuring experienced respondents. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), assuming strict adherence to the established EWMCI Research Ethics Committee.

The data collected from interviews and FGDs were systematically organized, subjected to comprehensive analysis, and interpreted using thematic analysis.

Data Transcription Process

All gathered raw data from the participants through interviews and FGDs were transcribed using the transcription process of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). By following these step-by-step processes, the researcher aligned their transcription approach with the guidelines outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). This rigorous transcription process ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative data, which served as the foundation for the subsequent narrative analysis and the meaningful interpretation of the gathered raw data (Ngag, 2023).

These categories were either drawn from established frameworks or custom-crafted to align with the study's objectives. To execute this analytical process, a series of vital steps were meticulously followed:

Step 1: Data Organization and Preparation. In the initial phase, all data sources, including interview transcripts, notes from FGDs, and pertinent documents, were thoroughly organized and prepared for analysis. This step ensured the structured arrangement and accessibility of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Step 2: Data Immersion. Subsequently, the researcher deeply immersed herself in the data by reviewing interview transcripts and FGD notes. This immersive process helped her understand the content and context inherent in the collected information (Nowell et al., 2017).

Step 3: Systematic Coding Process. The third step involved commencing a systematic coding process. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments or patterns within the data. These codes encapsulated fundamental concepts, ideas, or themes relating to parental experiences in raising children with special needs at Tacurong National High School.



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Step 4: Clustering and Preliminary Themes. Following coding, the identified codes were clustered into preliminary themes based on shared meaning or relevance. This step established an initial framework for organizing the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Step 5: Theme Scrutiny and Refinement. Following this, the emerging themes and their corresponding codes were scrutinized and refined. Researchers ensured their coherence and clarity, making necessary adjustments as needed. Each refined theme was assigned a descriptive label that succinctly represented its content, facilitating easy identification and interpretation (Terry et al., 2017).

Step 6: Linking Data Excerpts. Relevant data excerpts, such as quotations or segments from interviews and FGDs, were selected and linked to the themes. These excerpts served as supporting evidence for the identified themes (Nowell et al., 2017).

Step 7: Thematic Analysis. Finally, the thematic analysis transcended superficial identification. Researchers delved into interpreting the significance and implications of each theme within the context of the study's objectives, ensuring a deeper understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

They identified patterns, correlations, and variations within the themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the parental experiences in raising children with special needs.

Data Analysis

This study employed a thematic analysis to identify recurring experiences, emotions, and coping strategies among parents raising children with special needs. To provide a clear picture of common patterns, the researcher occasionally quantified the occurrence of specific themes, such as the number of parents reporting a particular challenge or strategy. These simple descriptive measures helped to illustrate the prevalence of experiences without reducing rich, personal narratives into mere numbers. Each theme was then interpreted through the participants' experiences, ensuring that the findings remained grounded in their voices and perspectives.

As explained by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), qualitative data can be systematically coded, categorized, and, when appropriate, quantified descriptively to highlight patterns, while still preserving the depth and meaning of human experiences. This approach allowed the researcher to present the findings in a structured and meaningful way that honors parents.

Qualitative data will undergo thematic analysis, involving coding transcripts to identify key themes and patterns related to emotions, social support, financial difficulties, and coping mechanisms. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings will occur in the discussion



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phase to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Dela Cruz, 2025; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Scope and Limitations

This study focused on parents' experiences in raising children with special needs at Tacurong National High School for the School Year 2025–2026. It aimed to describe the emotional, social, and financial challenges faced by parents and the coping mechanisms they used. The participants were limited to parents or guardians of students with special needs enrolled in the school. The study did not include parents from other schools or factors such as academic performance or medical conditions. The results were based on the participants' responses within the school setting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Raising a child is one of the most meaningful yet challenging roles a parent can experience. For parents with special needs, this responsibility often brings not only love and pride but also unique emotional, financial, and social challenges. This study was grounded in a phenomenological research design and aimed to understand the lived experiences of parents raising children with special needs. Phenomenology focuses on capturing the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by individuals, emphasizing their perceptions, meanings, emotions, and interpretations of their everyday realities.

The findings revealed that parents and guardians of children with special needs experience multifaceted challenges that affect their emotional well-being, financial stability, and daily routines. Caregivers encountered emotional stress and psychological adjustments as they cope with their children's conditions while gradually developing acceptance and understanding. Financial and practical difficulties also emerged, such as medical expenses, therapy, and the need to balance work and caregiving responsibilities. In addition, the study highlighted the demanding nature of caregiving, as parents and guardians provide continuous supervision, daily assistance, and support for their children's developmental needs. Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated resilience, love, and a strong sense of commitment, which enabled them to continue supporting and caring for their children.

Also, the findings revealed that parents and guardians of children with special needs rely on multiple sources of strength and coping strategies to manage the demands of caregiving. These included spiritual faith, support from family members, personal resilience, and deep love and commitment to their children. Faith and prayer served as emotional anchors for parents to remain hopeful despite challenges. Family members provided both emotional encouragement and practical assistance in caregiving responsibilities. Parents also demonstrated strong personal determination and perseverance in fulfilling their roles despite hardships. Ultimately, their



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unconditional love and sense of responsibility toward their children motivate them to continue supporting their children's needs and development.

Finally, the study revealed that programs addressing the needs of children with special needs and their families should be multi-dimensional, focusing on government financial support, inclusive and specialized education, talent and skill development, and community collaboration. Parents emphasized the necessity of subsidies, allowances, and free therapeutic services to reduce daily burdens, while highlighting the importance of trained teachers, specialized classrooms, and school-based programs that support learning and social inclusion. Skill development initiatives such as music, arts, vocational training, and technology-based programs were identified as key for fostering confidence and independence. Moreover, community and institutional support were found essential for ensuring holistic assistance, promoting participation, and reinforcing family resilience.

Conclusion

The following inferences were made considering this study's findings:

The experiences of parents and guardians raising children with special needs underscore the importance of compassion, resilience, and support systems in caregiving. While the challenges they faced are complex and demanding, their dedication reflected the profound role of family in nurturing and advocating for children with disabilities.

Also, parents and guardians highlighted the remarkable strength and dedication required in raising children with special needs. Their coping strategies demonstrated that caregiving is not only a responsibility but also a profound expression of resilience, faith, and love.

Finally, it was concluded that effective support for children with special needs extended beyond educational interventions to include financial, social, and community-based resources. Programs that integrated these elements not only empower children to develop academically, socially, and emotionally but also strengthen the families' capacity to provide care, highlighting the need for comprehensive, collaborative, and sustainable strategies in inclusive education and support systems.

Recommendations

Considering the findings, the following were recommended:

1.DepEd may develop and implement a "Special Needs Support Framework" that provides financial subsidies, free therapeutic services, and accessible school-based programs. This



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framework should ensure that families of children with special needs receive practical relief while promoting inclusive education in all public schools.

2.School Administrators may establish specialized classrooms and hire trained teachers capable of addressing diverse learning needs. Incorporate structured support systems, such as therapy schedules and talent-development programs, to help students thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

3.Curriculum Planners may design inclusive lesson plans and modules that integrate skill development in arts, music, technology, and vocational areas. These curricula should foster confidence, independence, and creativity while accommodating students' unique abilities and developmental requirements.

4.Teachers may actively provide individualized guidance and support in both academic and social settings. Emphasize collaborative activities, talent nurturing, and positive reinforcement to create a safe, inclusive, and engaging classroom environment.

5.Future Researchers may conduct longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of multi-dimensional programs for children with special needs. Explore innovative approaches to reduce caregiver burdens, enhance student inclusion, and strengthen community and institutional support systems to inform evidence-based policy and practice.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

In preparation for implementation, all the plans and recommendations were presented to East-West Mindanao Colleges, Inc. to ensure compliance with prescribed procedures and protocols. In this research examining parents' struggles and challenges in raising children with special needs, it was imperative to emphasize the paramount importance of ethical considerations. Before commencing this study, the following ethical principles will be highlighted:

Informed Consent: Before participation, consent was obtained from all school heads involved in the study. They must possess a comprehensive understanding of the study's objectives, methodologies, potential risks, and benefits. Furthermore, participation remained entirely voluntary, allowing the participants to withdraw from the study at any juncture without adverse consequences.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: To safeguard identities and responses, rigorous measures were followed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Rather than using actual names,



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pseudonyms or codes were used to uphold the participants' privacy. The collected data was securely stored with access restricted solely to the research team.

Avoiding Harm: Delicate subjects, such as the challenges inherent in their roles, were discussed with potential emotional and psychological impact on participants. Strategies were in place to minimize distress, and a support system was readily available to assist participants.

Researcher-Participant Relationship: The researcher maintained a professional and respectful rapport when engaging with the school heads. Any actions that might harm the participants were scrupulously avoided, ensuring their utmost dignity and respect throughout the research process.

Data Protection: Adherence to data protection regulations and laws was observed to safeguard the participants' personal information. Stringent measures were employed to ensure the secure storage and transmission of data.

Voluntary Participation: Participants were assured that their participation in the study was devoid of any coercion or external pressure.

Researcher Bias: The researcher remained vigilant regarding potential biases that might influence data collection and analysis, upholding objectivity and transparency throughout the research endeavor.

Institutional Approval: Before initiating the study, the researcher sought ethical clearance from the pertinent institutional review boards or ethics committees.

Honesty and Integrity: The research findings were reported truthfully and accurately, free from manipulation or distortion to align with preconceived notions or biases.

Beneficence: The potential benefits of the research in educational practices and policies were thoughtfully considered, ensuring that the study contributes to the education system.

Cultural Sensitivity: The researcher demonstrated cultural sensitivity by respecting local customs, beliefs, and practices within the research setting and refraining from imposing external values on participants.

Inclusion and Diversity: The study's structure prioritized inclusivity and diversity, encompassing a wide spectrum of parents' struggles and challenges in raising children with special needs.



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Declaration AI Tools Utilization

I do hereby declare the use AI tools, such as Chat GPT and Grammarly for grammar checking and sentence organization purposes only.

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