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Silent Strengths: Lived Experiences of Parents of Children with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of parents raising children with special needs in Barangay 6, Sto. Niño Extension. It aimed to understand the emotional journeys, daily challenges, coping strategies, and personal growth of these parents. Guided by a transcendental phenomenological approach, the research captured authentic parental perspectives, highlighting how caregiving shape's identity, resilience, and family dynamics. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with selected parents and analyzed using thematic methods to identify recurring patterns and insights. Findings revealed that parents face multiple challenges, including emotional stress, financial constraints, lack of knowledge or experience, social stigma, and physical exhaustion. Despite these difficulties, parents demonstrated remarkable strengths, such as emotional resilience, practical problem-solving, and spiritual coping, which enabled them to adapt to complex caregiving demands. Support systems from family, community, and government services played a vital role in reducing stress and enhancing parental capacity. The study also highlighted that acceptance of their child's condition is a gradual but transformative process, fostering empathy, patience, and hope. The findings underscore the importance of holistic support programs, inclusive policies, and community awareness to enhance the well-being of both parents and children with special needs. This research contributes to understanding the multifaceted experiences of caregivers, providing evidence-based insights for educators, practitioners, policymakers, and future researchers to develop interventions that strengthen parental resilience and promote inclusive family-centered practices.

Keywords: *parents, children with special needs, lived experiences, coping strategies, resilience, family support, acceptance*

INTRODUCTION

Parenting plays a pivotal role in the care and development of children, particularly those with special needs. Raising a child with special needs requires significant physical, emotional, and financial resources, as well as consistent attention to the child's developmental requirements. While parenting can be challenging for all caregivers, it is especially demanding for parents of children with special needs. Globally, children with conditions such as developmental disabilities, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), sensory impairments, intellectual disabilities, and chronic health conditions require continuous support, specialized care, and long-term interventions. These children, who may have physical, intellectual, or developmental differences, need additional guidance, understanding, and care to thrive and feel included in society.

Parents of children with special needs often experience higher levels of stress and social isolation compared to parents of typically developing children. They dedicate considerable effort and time to identifying qualified healthcare professionals, educational institutions, and support networks that can assist their child. However, many of the challenges faced by these parents are frequently overlooked by society. Research by Romulo N. Lagon on the lived experiences of parents with children with special needs, using a phenomenological qualitative approach, highlights the complexity of these experiences. Supporting literature indicates that parents often experience elevated stress, anxiety, and emotional burnout, which can negatively impact their mental health, social relationships, and financial stability (McConnell et al., 2020; Brehaut et al., 2020). Bertelli (2020) observed that these pressures can manifest in behaviors such as impatience, hostility, and social disengagement, sometimes disrupting regular therapy sessions. Similarly, Smith (2002) reported that parents of children with disabilities encounter greater stress, increased caregiving challenges, health problems, feelings of restriction, and higher levels of parental depression compared to parents of children without disabilities.

Further studies underscore the emotional, financial, and practical demands of parenting children with special needs. Tigere and Makhubele (2021) emphasized the significant time and financial investment required, while Lee (2020) noted that disruptions to regular routines may trigger agitation in children with neurocognitive difficulties or ASD. Zuna et al. (2020) highlighted the critical role of support networks—including family, community, and professional resources—in fostering parental resilience. Argyropoulos and Chamonikolaou (2016) observed that having a child with special needs can disturb parents' life balance, whether the need arises at birth or due to an accident or illness. According to Soubhi, Lima, Aitdaoud, and Talbi (2016), resilience in this context is dynamic, influenced by internal factors such as coping strategies and self-efficacy, as well as external factors like social support and access to resources.

Despite these insights, many parents report being unprepared to manage their child's disability or to collaborate effectively with educators (Thwala, Ntinda, & Hlanze, 2015). Bawalsah (2016) found that parents of children with physical disabilities experience higher stress levels than those of children with hearing impairments. Pottie and Ingram (2008), as cited by Khan and Alam (2016), noted that parenting a child with a disability can provoke negative coping strategies, including blaming, emotional withdrawal, and feelings of helplessness, which contribute to adverse moods. Szymańska and Dobreko (2017) further observed that parental responses to stress often involve either withdrawal from the situation or exerting pressure on the child. Parental education and awareness were shown to improve coping efficiency (Atsoy & Sevim, 2018), while Asa et al. (2018) highlighted the role of active psychological coping strategies and family support in fostering socio-academic development for children with disabilities.

While much of the existing literature focuses on stress, coping mechanisms, and challenges, there is still a paucity of research exploring the lived experiences of Filipino parents in depth. Most studies rely on quantitative metrics, such as stress levels, children's academic performance, or financial expenditure, without capturing the personal narratives and day-to-day realities behind these numbers. Understanding these lived experiences is crucial for designing programs, policies, and support systems that are culturally relevant, emotionally supportive, and practically effective. By exploring parents' struggles, joys, and coping strategies, researchers and policymakers can develop interventions that genuinely reflect the needs of families raising children with special needs in the Philippines.

Despite the growing body of research, parents continue to face multifaceted obstacles, including emotional and mental health challenges, financial strain, and physical exhaustion. Emotional concerns include chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness, while financial burdens arise from medical expenses, therapy costs, and specialized care. While several studies have examined the experiences of parents of children with special needs, few have delved into their personal stories, coping strategies, and resilience processes. Gaining insight into how parents confront these challenges, sustain their commitment, and nurture their children can inform more responsive and effective support systems.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of parents of children with special needs in Tacloban City. It seeks to examine the strengths parents develop, the challenges they encounter, their coping mechanisms, the support they receive, and their acceptance of their parental role. By understanding their narratives, this study aspires to illuminate the daily realities of these parents, highlighting not only the challenges they face but also the resilience, determination, and strategies they employ to navigate the demands of raising a child with special needs.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What strengths do parents develop while caring for their children with special needs?
2. What challenges do parents face in caring for their children with special needs?
3. How do parents cope with the difficulties of caring for a child with special needs?
4. What support do parents receive to help them in their parenting journey?
5. How do parents accept their role as parents of children with special needs?

In conclusion, exploring the lived experiences of parents of children with special needs provides critical insights into the emotional, social, and practical realities of caregiving. By capturing their narratives, this study aims to give voice to the challenges, strengths, and coping strategies of these parents, offering a foundation for culturally sensitive interventions, policies, and programs that can meaningfully support their well-being and the holistic development of their children.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically descriptive transcendental phenomenology, to explore and understand the lived experiences of parents of children with special needs. Phenomenology focuses on describing phenomena as consciously experienced by individuals, aiming to uncover the meanings they attach to life events (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The descriptive approach emphasized bracketing researchers' assumptions to present participants' experiences authentically. A qualitative design was chosen because it allows an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives, focusing on emotions, meanings, and insights rather than numerical data (Creswell, 2014). This approach was suitable for exploring personal stories, challenges, and coping strategies, capturing the depth and essence of parental experiences.

Participants of the Study

The study involved five (5) parents of children with special needs, purposively selected for their direct and meaningful experiences with the phenomenon. Purposive sampling allowed the selection of participants capable of providing rich insights relevant to the study objectives (Creswell, 2013). Sample size in phenomenological research is guided by data saturation rather than statistical formulas, and a sample of five participants was deemed sufficient as recurring themes emerged with no new insights (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Inclusion criteria required participants to be biological or adoptive parents, primary caregivers for at least one year, willing to participate in in-depth interviews, and able to provide informed consent. Both mothers and fathers were included to ensure balanced perspectives, and researchers practiced bracketing to minimize bias (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Locale

The study was conducted in selected communities within Barangay 6, Sto. Niño Extension, Tacloban City, Leyte, Philippines. This area was chosen due to its growing population of families with children diagnosed with disabilities such as autism, intellectual disability, ADHD, and physical impairments. Coordination with local officials helped identify potential participants. The locale allowed researchers to explore parental experiences within a real-life context influenced by cultural values, socio-economic conditions, and available support services, highlighting the role of family, school, and local systems in shaping resilience.

Instrument of the Study

The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide, adapted from Billiones et al. (2020) and tailored to this study. The guide had three parts: participant profile, general questions about experiences, and specific questions about challenges, strengths, motivations, and parental journey. Three experts—a language specialist and two research teachers—validated the instrument for clarity and relevance. Since participants were native Waray speakers, the guide was translated and validated in Waray-Waray to ensure comfort and accuracy.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered systematically and ethically. A transmittal letter was prepared and approved by the Research Coordinator, securing permission to proceed. Researchers coordinated with Barangay officials to identify potential participants and verified qualifications against the inclusion criteria. Qualified participants were purposively selected and personally met to explain the study, establish rapport, and set interview schedules. Informed consent was obtained, emphasizing voluntary participation and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted using the semi-structured guide, audio-recorded with permission, and participants were thanked afterward. This procedure ensured organized, ethical, and respectful data collection.

Data Analysis Procedure

The study employed qualitative analysis to examine the lived experiences of participants. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and researchers familiarized themselves with the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts. Significant statements were coded, and related codes were grouped into categories and themes. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the deeper meanings of experiences and to answer the research questions.

Credibility was ensured through repeated review, and findings were presented narratively with participant quotations, using pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. This systematic approach ensured accuracy and authenticity of the results.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical rigor was maintained throughout the study. Participant identities were protected using pseudonyms, ensuring anonymity (Babbie, 2020). Informed consent was obtained, highlighting voluntary participation and the right to withdraw (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2021). Data verification included member checking and triangulation to establish credibility (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Proper in-text citations ensured academic integrity (APA, 2020).

Audio recordings were used solely for transcription and deleted after data validation (Gill, 2020). An audit trail was maintained, documenting all research activities to allow transparency and verification (Halpern, 2023). These measures collectively ensured the study respected participants' dignity, confidentiality, and professional standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strengths Parents Develop While Caring for Their Children with Special Needs

This section presents the results and discussion of the study focusing on the lived experiences of parents of children with special needs. Based on the analysis of participants' responses, three major themes emerged: (1) Emotional and Psychological Strengths, (2) Practical and Interpersonal Strengths, and (3) Spiritual and Philosophical Strengths. These themes reflect the emotional, practical, and spiritual capacities encountered by parents in their caregiving journey.

Theme 1: Emotional and Psychological Strengths

The first theme highlights the emotional and psychological capacities that parents develop as they navigate the challenges of raising a child with special needs. Participant 3 (P3, L87–89) shared, "*Para ha akon, waray ka gud lain mahihimo kundi karawaton an kamatuoran, ngan samtang naglalabay an panahon, hinay-hinay ka natututo nga magin marig-on bisan ano pa man*." (It feels like you have no choice but to accept reality, and over time you learn to stand strong through it all). These strengths allow them to cope effectively and remain emotionally stable while supporting their child. Participant 5 (P5, L62–65, 86–88) stated, "*Damo gud an nagbag-o mas nagin haluag an amon pag-intindi, ngan damu an amon pasensya… kinahanglan gud nga ibutang mo an imo kalugaringon ha iya sitwasyon*." (It changed a lot; our understanding became broader, and we developed a lot of patience… you have to be in his shoes). This suggests that caregiving strengthens parents' emotional intelligence, allowing them to regulate emotions, manage frustrations, and approach situations with compassion and understanding. Similarly, Participant 5 (P5, L189–190) said, "*Kinahanglan mo maintindihan nga iba an iya intelihensiya. Naghuhuna-huna hiya sugad hin bata; natututo ka nga tan-awon an kalibutan tikang ha iya panan-aw*." (You have to understand that his intelligence is different. He thinks like a toddler; you learn to see the world from his perspective). This demonstrates how parents cultivate perceptual flexibility, adjusting their expectations, communication, and caregiving approaches accordingly.

Beyond emotional resilience, participants developed enhanced awareness and insight regarding their child's needs. They learned that their child's way of thinking and learning may differ from others. Participants described learning to accept their child's condition and adjust to their new reality. Emotional resilience emerged as a key strength, enabling them to endure challenges and remain strong despite difficulties.

This theme is strongly supported by Resilience Theory (2003), which explains how individuals adapt positively despite adversity, stress, or challenging life circumstances. Overall, Emotional and Psychological Strengths reflect how parents transform challenges into personal growth. Through resilience, patience, expanded awareness, and creative thinking, parents develop stronger emotional stability and psychological maturity, which not only help them care effectively for their child but also shape their personal development as individuals and caregivers.

Theme 2: Practical and Interpersonal Strengths

The second theme highlights the practical skills and interpersonal abilities that parents develop while caring for their children with special needs. Participant 2 (P2, L269–270) shared, "*Nabahin na an akon oras… natututo ka magplano ngan himoon nga importante an kada higayon para han imo anak ngan pamilya*." (My time is now divided… you learn to plan and make every moment count for both your child and your family). This response shows that parents become more intentional in allocating their time and resources, maximizing productivity to meet the needs of all family members. Participant 4 (P4, L270–271) stated, "*Mas damu an oras nga ginhahatag ko ha mayda espesyal nga panginahanglan – natututo ka mag-organisar han iya pag-ataman, therapy, ngan adlaw-adlaw nga rutina*." (I spend more time with the one who has special needs compared to the others – you learn to organize care, therapy, and daily routines). This demonstrates how parents strengthen their organizational skills by managing therapies, medical appointments, and structured daily activities.

Caring for a child with special needs also enhances parents' communication abilities. Since some children may have difficulty expressing themselves, parents learn to observe non-verbal cues and interpret gestures carefully.

This theme aligns with Family Systems Theory developed by Murray Bowen, which emphasizes that the family functions as an interconnected system, where changes affecting one member influence the entire family. Practical and Interpersonal Strengths demonstrate how parents become more organized, responsible, communicative, and proactive. Through time management, care coordination, empathetic communication, and advocacy, parents develop essential life skills that support both their child and their family.

Theme 3: Spiritual and Philosophical Strengths

Spiritual and Philosophical Strengths refer to the inner beliefs and perspectives that help parents manage the emotional demands of raising a child with special needs. Parents emphasized that faith and acceptance are essential in helping them remain strong despite challenges. Participant 2 (P2, L281–282) shared, "*…there is Someone who decides for us… we need to accept everything and just continue praying*." This statement reflects the parent's belief in a higher power and the importance of surrendering circumstances beyond personal control. Faith and prayer serve as sources of comfort and emotional stability. Participant 3 (P3, L88) stated, "*Because if you don't accept it, both you and your child will continue to struggle – you learn to find purpose in the journey.*" This shows that acceptance is not only about resignation but about understanding and finding purpose in the experience.

Participants' responses indicate that faith and acceptance reduce emotional distress and promote resilience. When parents interpret their situation as meaningful and guided by a higher purpose, they experience less frustration and more emotional balance. These inner strengths allow them to remain patient, hopeful, and committed to caregiving.

This theme aligns with Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1950), which explains that the family functions as an interconnected emotional system. It is also consistent with Walsh's Family Resilience Theory (2003), emphasizing that belief systems are central to family resilience. Overall, Spiritual and Philosophical Strengths demonstrate that faith and acceptance play a vital role in helping parents cope with caregiving challenges, develop resilience, maintain emotional balance, and sustain their commitment to their child's well-being.

Challenges Parents Face in Caring for Their Child with Special Needs

Analysis of the interview data revealed five major themes: (1) Behavioral Challenges of Children, (2) Constant Parental Attention and Care, (3) Impact on Work and Personal Life, (4) Emotional and Social Challenges, and (5) Medical Concerns. These themes illustrate the emotional, physical, social, and medical difficulties experienced by parents while fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities.

Theme 1: Behavioral Challenges of Children

Behavioral Challenges of Children refer to difficulties parents encounter in managing their child's behavior, including aggression, emotional outbursts, and tantrums, especially in public settings. Participant 1 (P1, L123–124) shared, "*Kun tigda mo hiya gin samok, tigda man hiya manakit*." (If you suddenly bother him, he might suddenly hit you.) Similarly, Participant 1 (P1, L117–118) explained, "*Kun gin sasamok mo hiya, amo na it iya kasina ngan magwa it iya behavior*." (If you bother him, that's when he gets upset and starts acting out.) Participant 3 (P3, L53–54) stated, "*Diri ka basta-basta makakagdara ha bisan diin kay bangin mag tantrums hiya*." (You cannot just bring them anywhere because they might have a tantrum.)

These findings are consistent with related literature indicating that children with special needs, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder or developmental delays, often exhibit challenging behaviors, which are frequent sources of parental stress (Khan, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2021; Brown, Parker, & Davis, 2022; Lee & Kim, 2023; Emel Genç, 2025). This theme aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory (1984) and Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory, highlighting that the child's behavior affects the family system.

In conclusion, Behavioral Challenges of Children highlight the demanding nature of caregiving and underscore the need for emotional resilience, strategic coping, and constant vigilance.

Theme 2: Constant Parental Attention and Care

Constant Parental Attention and Care refer to the continuous supervision required from parents of children with special needs. Participant 3 (P3, L48–50) explained, "*Kun gutiay pa hira, kinahanglan 24 oras mo gud hiya bantayan ngan atamanon*." (When they are still small, you really need to take care of them 24 hours a day.) Participant 2 (P2, L137–138) shared, "*Gin uuna ko gud hiya. Gin sisigurado ko anay nga naataman ko hiya antes ako magbuhat han iba ko nga buruhaton*." (I really prioritize her first. I make sure to attend to her before doing my other tasks.) Participant 4 (P4, L79–80) stated, "*Ako gud it nagbabantay ngan nag-aataman ha iya, amo nga nakatutok gud ako ha iya*." (I am the one taking care and watching over him, so I really focus on him.)

This theme aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory (1984) and Walsh's Family Resilience Theory (2003), reflecting the physical and emotional demands, adaptive coping strategies, and family cohesion involved in sustained caregiving.

Theme 3: Impact on Work and Personal Life

Impact on Work and Personal Life describes how caregiving responsibilities affect parents' employment, daily routines, and personal time. Participant 4 (P4, L79–80) expressed, "*Diri hiya burden ha akon trabaho. Gin dudugangan ko nala it akon oras para ha iya.*" (He is not a burden to my work. I just give more of my time to him.) Participant 3 (P3, L48) stated, "*Dako gud an epekto kay mas damo an iya kinahanglan nga atensyon ngan pag-ataman*." (It has a big impact because they need more attention and care.) Participant 2 (P2, L156–157) shared, "*Mayda mga oras nga nakikipag-away hiya ngan diri mamamati, tapos tigda nala mawawara nga waray man* la siring." (Sometimes she fights back and does not listen, then suddenly leaves without saying anything.)

This theme aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory (1984) and Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory, emphasizing the interconnectedness of family adjustments, adaptive coping, and time management.

Theme 4: Emotional and Social Challenges

Emotional and Social Challenges emphasize parents' fears, uncertainties, and concerns about societal acceptance. Participant 3 (P3, L53–54) expressed, "*Makuri kay nahadlok kami bangin diri hiya karawaton ha mga lugar nga amon gin kakadtuan sugad ha eskwelahan.*" (It is hard because we are afraid, they might not be accepted in places we go to, like school.) Participant 3 (P3, L44–45) shared, "*Kay syahan ko pa nga pagin nanay, diri ako maaram kon ano akon bubuhaton*." (Since it was my first time being a mother, I did not know what to do.) Participant 4 (P4, L84) stated, "*Tubtob yana waray pa man may nagreklamo ha barangay parte ha iya*." (As of now, no one has approached the barangay regarding concerns.)

This theme aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory (1984) and is supported by Williams, Thompson, and Baker (2021) and Nguyen and Tran (2022), showing that societal perceptions amplify parental stress and emotional vulnerability.

Theme 5: Medical Concerns

Medical Concerns reflect ongoing health issues requiring medical attention. Participant 2 (P2, L63–69) shared, "*Amo nga pirme ko hiya gin dadara ha ospital*." (That is why I always bring her to the hospital.) Participant 2 (P2, L64–65) stated, "*Mayda mga panahon nga nabalik an iya kondisyon. Mayda* *oras nga nagtatawa hiya tapos tigda nala nauubo ngan diri makahigda*." (Sometimes her condition comes back. There are times when she laughs, then suddenly chokes and cannot sleep.)

This theme aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory (1984) and emphasizes that ongoing medical issues create constant worry, require continuous vigilance, and demand adaptive coping strategies.

Parents' Coping Mechanisms in Caring for Their Child

Analysis revealed three main themes: (1) Emotional and Spiritual Coping, (2) Active Stress Management, and (3) Support System and Parental Responsibility. These themes illustrate how parents manage the challenges of caregiving.

Theme 1: Emotional and Spiritual Coping

Participants rely heavily on emotional and spiritual coping mechanisms. Participant 2 (P2, L163) shared, *"Gin-aagwanta ko ini pinaagi han pag-ampo. Nagro-rosaryo ako."* (I manage it through prayers. I pray the rosary.) Participant 2 (P2, L129–130) stated, "Nag-aataman la ako nga magpabilin nga malaksi ngan positibo an akon hunahuna." (I just try to stay mentally strong and positive. As they say, think positive.)

Theme 2: Active Stress Management

Parents actively manage stress through personal activities and relaxation techniques. Participant 3 (P3, L62) shared, *"May-ada ako kinaandan kada kulop nga nagzu-zumba ako para maibanan an stress… kinahanglan may-ada ka buruhaton basi malikyan an stress."* (I have a habit in the afternoon; I do Zumba to release stress… you need to find a habit to avoid stress.) Participant 5 (P5, L146) said, *"Pagpahuway… pagginhawa hin marayaw, magpahuway anay, magrelaks."* (Rest… just breathe, take a break, relax.) Participant 4 (P4, L93) shared, *"Ginagamit ko an akon cellphone ngan nagkikita TV."* (I use my cellphone and watch TV.) Participant 3 (P3, L71) said, *"Para ha akon, ginpipirit ko nga pakalmahon an akon kalugaringon ngan ginpapa-remind ko an akon kalugaringon nga okay la ako."* (For me, I try to compose myself and remind myself that I am okay.)

Theme 3: Support System and Parental Responsibility

Participants emphasized the importance of external support and strong personal responsibility. Participant 1 (P1, L138) said, *"Naka-enroll hiya ha PIDAC, ngan nabubuligan han PhilHealth ha pagbayad."* (He is enrolled in PIDAC, and PhilHealth helps cover the payment.) Participant 5 (P5, L158–159) stated, *"Pananglitan may-ada usa nga pirmi available… bangin usa han amon mga parent."* (Let's say someone who is always available… maybe just one of our relatives.) Participant 4 (P4, L100) said, *"Ako an nag-aataman ha iya kay syempre, ako an nanay."* (I am the one who takes care of him because, of course, I am the mother.) Participant 5 (P5, L150–151) stated, *"An hunahuna nga waray na iba nga* *makakaya pag-ataman ha iya kundi ikaw la."* (The thought that there is no one else who can handle him except you.)

These findings indicate that parents rely on both social and institutional support while demonstrating a strong sense of duty, which strengthens resilience and motivates continued caregiving.

Supports Parents Receive That Help Them in Their Parenting Journey

This section presents the findings regarding parents' perceptions of the effectiveness of government support services for their children with special needs. Based on the analysis of participants' responses, three themes emerged: (1) Provision of Basic Needs, (2) Improved Healthcare Access, and (3) Perceived Improvement Compared to Previous Conditions. These themes illustrate how parents evaluate the impact of government assistance on their caregiving responsibilities and their child's overall well-being.

Theme 1: Provision of Basic Needs

The first theme refers to how government support services help families meet essential necessities such as food and clothing. Parents emphasized that ensuring their child's cleanliness and proper appearance is a crucial responsibility that protects the child's dignity and promotes social acceptance. Participant 1 (P1, L201) shared, "Of course so he won't look dirty. When he goes outside, he should look clean." This statement reflects the parent's concern for maintaining their child's hygiene and presentability. By providing food and clothing, basic needs are sufficiently supported, allowing parents to feel more secure and focused in fulfilling their caregiving role.

Participants' responses suggest that when fundamental needs are met, emotional and financial stress is reduced. Support for daily necessities enables families to concentrate more on caregiving rather than worrying about survival. This finding aligns with related literature, which emphasizes that accessible support systems and community resources significantly lessen the physical and psychological burdens experienced by parents (Ahmed & Collins, 2021). Research further highlights that such assistance strengthens parental confidence and promotes overall family functioning (Robinson & Gray, 2023).

In conclusion, the theme *Provision of Basic Needs* demonstrates that effective government support begins with meeting essential daily necessities. By ensuring access to food and clothing, support services reduce stress, strengthen family stability, and enhance parental resilience, forming the foundation for effective caregiving and the well-being of children with special needs.

Theme 2: Improved Healthcare Access

The second theme highlights how government support facilitates access to medical care, therapy, and other health-related services for children with special needs. Parents acknowledged that assistance in securing medical consultations, medications, and regular check-ups alleviates the burden of navigating complex healthcare needs. Participant 2 (P2, L205–206) stated, *"Amo nga pirme ko hiya gin dadara ha ospital… mas sayon na an proseso kun may suporta ha PhilHealth."*

("That is why I always bring her to the hospital… the process is easier with PhilHealth support.") This statement reflects the parent's appreciation for programs that streamline healthcare access and reduce logistical and financial stress.

Improved healthcare access allows parents to respond promptly to their child's medical needs and prevents health complications from escalating. Studies indicate that access to healthcare services and financial support for treatment enhances parental confidence and reduces anxiety associated with caregiving (Kumar & Singh, 2020; Robinson & Gray, 2023). By ensuring consistent medical attention, government programs directly contribute to the child's health outcomes and parental peace of mind.

In conclusion, *Improved Healthcare Access* illustrates the vital role of government support in enabling parents to meet their child's medical needs effectively. Access to services and financial assistance empowers parents to provide timely care, reduces emotional and practical burdens, and strengthens overall family resilience.

Theme 3: Perceived Improvement Compared to Previous Conditions

The third theme captures parents' perception that government support has positively transformed their caregiving experience over time. Participants reported that assistance programs have led to noticeable improvements in both the child's condition and their own ability to provide care. Participant 5 (P5, L210–212) shared, *"Before, pirme kami problema ha pagkaon ngan bulig ha ospital… ngani yana, mas madali na it pag-ataman ha iya."* ("Before, we often had problems with food and hospital support… now, it is easier to take care of him.") This highlights a perceived progression in their caregiving journey facilitated by sustained support.

Parents' reflections suggest that consistent support enhances hope, reduces stress, and increases motivation to continue caregiving despite ongoing challenges. Literature indicates that longitudinal improvements in family support contribute to better psychological well-being, caregiving capacity, and family stability (Ahmed & Collins, 2021; Torres & Silva, 2024). When parents perceive tangible improvements, they feel more empowered and equipped to manage their child's needs.

In conclusion, the theme *Perceived Improvement Compared to Previous Conditions* emphasizes the significance of sustained support in transforming parental experiences. Government programs that show measurable benefits not only improve caregiving efficiency but also reinforce parents' confidence, resilience, and commitment to their child's development.

Acceptance of Role as Parents of Children with Special Needs

Analysis revealed two themes: (1) Acceptance of Parental Role, and (2) Changes in Understanding of Parenthood.

Theme 1: Acceptance of Parental Role

Participant 2 (P2, L281) shared, *“Akseptado ko ito kay it oras panahon diri aadi ha akon…”* (I have accepted it because time and life are not in my control.) Participant 2 (P2, L281–282) further explained, *“…May nagbubuot ha aton so amo iton kinahanglan akseptaron ta iro ngatanan ngan prayers la.”* (…there is Someone who decides for us; we need to accept everything and just continue praying.) Participant 3 (P3, L87) said*, “Hm kuan kasi parang no choice kana kasi parang accept the reality.”* (It feels like you have no choice but to accept reality.) Participant 5 (P5, L189–190) stated, *“You have to understand that his… yun his intelligence is away for he thinks like he's a toddler.”* (You have to understand that his intelligence is different. He thinks like a toddler.)

Acceptance develops through emotional strength, awareness, and faith, allowing parents to provide consistent care and maintain emotional balance.

Theme 2: Changes in Understanding of Parenthood

Participant 2 (P2, L269–270) shared, *“Tak oras natutunga.”* (My time is now divided.) Participant 4 (P4, L270–271) stated, “*Mas dako nak oras ngadi han espesyal kuntra han normal.”* (I spend more time with the one who has special needs compared to the others.) Participant 3 (P3, L88) expressed, *“Kase kapag di mo tinanggap, pareho lang kami mahihirapan.”* (Because if you don’t accept it, both you and your child will continue to struggle.)

This theme shows that parenting a child with special needs requires practical adjustments, emotional growth, and focus on the child’s needs. It aligns with Walsh’s Family Resilience Theory (2003), emphasizing shared responsibility, support, and communication in strengthening family resilience.

The experiences shared by parents of children with special needs reveal a complex interaction of challenges, coping strategies, and personal growth. Across participants, emotional resilience, practical skills, and spiritual strength emerged as key competencies developed through caregiving. Emotional and psychological strengths enabled parents to manage stress, regulate their emotions, and maintain a positive outlook despite ongoing behavioral, medical, and social difficulties. Practical and interpersonal strengths, such as time management, organization, and communication, helped parents handle daily routines, therapies, and educational needs. Spiritual and philosophical strengths provided meaning, purpose, and inner balance, reinforcing their dedication to their child’s well-being. Together, these strengths show how parents turn challenges into opportunities for growth, self-awareness, and stronger family bonds.

Analyzing the coping strategies of these parents highlights the importance of adaptive mechanisms in sustaining caregiving. Emotional and spiritual coping through prayer, meditation, and acceptance helped parents manage grief, anxiety, and frustration, consistent with Walsh's Family Resilience Theory (2003). Active stress management, including relaxation, hobbies, and mindfulness, allowed them to recharge mentally and physically. Support systems, such as relatives, community resources, and institutional programs like PhilHealth and PIDAC, further strengthened their ability to handle stress. This combination of personal resilience and external support demonstrates a dynamic system where coping strategies are both self-driven and socially reinforced.

The findings suggest that parenting a child with special needs is more than a set of challenges; it is a transformative journey that reshapes parental identity. Participants' reflections on acceptance, empathy, and perspective-taking indicate a reconstructed understanding of parenthood to meet the child's unique needs. This aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory (1984) and Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1950), showing that parental adaptation involves both personal growth and family-level adjustments. Parents learn to view hardships as meaningful experiences, building resilience and skills that extend beyond caregiving to broader life situations.

Synthesizing the results, it is clear that parents' experiences balance challenges with growth. Behavioral difficulties, medical needs, and social perceptions present continuous stress, yet these stressors also foster emotional intelligence, problem-solving skills, and spiritual insight. Integrating these strengths into daily caregiving reflects a continuous process of learning, adapting, and finding meaning. Parents' ability to adjust, persevere, and discover purpose demonstrates the human capacity for resilience and shows how adversity can cultivate strength, patience, and wisdom.

In conclusion, the lived experiences of parents of children with special needs reflect a holistic transformation across emotional, practical, and spiritual dimensions. Challenges such as behavioral management, constant caregiving, and medical concerns coexist with personal growth, strengthened coping strategies, and family resilience. These findings emphasize that parents are not only caregivers but resilient individuals whose experiences provide valuable insights for family-centered support and interventions. Ultimately, acceptance, faith, practical adaptability, and external support enable parents to navigate the complexities of special-needs caregiving while fostering both their child's development and their own personal and family growth.

Summary

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically the transcendental phenomenological approach, to capture the authentic perspectives and emotions of participants. By practicing *epoche*, the researchers set aside personal biases, ensuring that the findings reflected the parents lived experiences accurately. Data were collected from selected parents of children with special needs in Barangay 6, Sto. Niño Extension, highlighting their personal narratives while acknowledging that the findings may not be generalizable to all parents in similar circumstances.

Findings revealed that parents experienced a broad range of emotions, including initial shock, fear, and uncertainty, which gradually developed into acceptance, resilience, and emotional growth. Participants faced challenges such as balancing caregiving with work and family responsibilities, financial constraints, social stigma, and physical and emotional exhaustion. To navigate these challenges, parents employed diverse coping strategies, including seeking emotional support from family and community, practicing faith and spirituality, advocating for their children, and developing personal resilience.

Parents also gained valuable insights, including patience, hope, and a deeper understanding of the transformative role of caregiving. These experiences shaped not only the individual parent but also family dynamics, highlighting the profound impact of raising a child with special needs on personal growth, family cohesion, and overall well-being.

The study further explored the support systems parents' access in their caregiving journey. Emotional, practical, and financial assistance from family members, friends, and the community emerged as critical facilitators of resilience. Spiritual support through prayer and faith provided additional strength, enabling parents to navigate caregiving demands with greater confidence. Acceptance of their parental role was identified as a gradual but transformative process, allowing parents to focus on their child's strengths rather than limitations, thereby fostering positive outlooks and reinforcing commitment to care.

CONCLUSION

Parenting a child with special needs is both demanding and transformative. The findings indicate that while parents face emotional stress, financial difficulties, and social misunderstanding, these challenges simultaneously cultivate resilience, patience, and compassion. Parents develop practical skills, emotional strength, and adaptive strategies that enable them to meet the complex needs of their children effectively.

The study is supported by several theoretical frameworks. Resilience Theory explains how parents develop perseverance, emotional strength, and adaptability despite caregiving challenges. Family Systems Theory highlights the adjustments and reorganization of family roles in response to a child's special needs. Social Support Theory emphasizes the critical role of emotional, practical, and financial assistance in alleviating stress, while Adaptation Theory illustrates how parents gradually accept their caregiving role and adjust to new realities. Collectively, these theories underscore that parents' experiences are shaped by a dynamic interplay of resilience, family adaptation, support systems, and acceptance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance support for parents of children with special needs:

1. For Parents of Children with Special Needs:
1.1 Continuously seek emotional and social support from family, peers, and parent support groups.

1.2 Practice self-care and stress management strategies to maintain emotional and physical well-being.
1.3 Engage in ongoing learning about their child's condition to improve caregiving skills.

2. For Teachers and Special Education Practitioners:
2.1 Maintain consistent communication and collaboration with parents regarding the child's progress.
2.2 Conduct parent education seminars and workshops to enhance understanding of caregiving for children with special needs.
2.3 Create inclusive and supportive learning environments that address the unique needs of each child.

3. For School Administrators and Community Leaders:
3.1 Establish parent support groups within the community to foster peer networking and shared learning.
3.2 Improve access to learning materials, therapy services, and inclusive facilities for children with special needs.
3.3 Implement awareness programs to reduce stigma and promote acceptance of children with special needs.

4. For Policymakers and Government Agencies:
4.1 Develop and strengthen policies that provide financial assistance, healthcare support, and educational access for families.
4.2 Ensure the availability of therapy centers, inclusive schools, and community-based rehabilitation programs.
4.3 Implement mental health services and counseling programs tailored for parents and caregivers.

5. For Future Researchers:
5.1 Conduct similar qualitative studies in other communities to explore diverse parental experiences.
5.2 Investigate the long-term psychological, social, and financial impact of caregiving on parents.
5.3 Explore effective community-based interventions that support families of children with special needs.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the importance of implementing comprehensive, accessible, and family-centered support systems. By addressing emotional, social, and practical needs, stakeholders can enhance parents' capacity to provide effective care, strengthen family resilience, and promote the overall well-being of children with special needs. Recognizing and supporting these parents as resilient, adaptive, and dedicated caregivers is essential in building inclusive communities that value and empower all families.

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