

# Strategies of Teachers in Teaching Children with Special Needs in Online Learning

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## Abstract

In this pandemic, Teachers need to change their modalities to meet the needs of their students at the same time following the protocols that are mandated by the society. This is the reason why teachers need to learn how to do online learning. According to Stem, J., Online learning is education that takes place over the Internet. It is often referred to as “e-learning”, however, online learning is just one type of “distance learning”.

Researchers collected data using qualitative method through semi-structured interviews from special education and regular teachers who are handling learners with special needs across a variety of grade levels in Elementary both public and private schools. The study has 3 categories which answers the following: **1) the problems that teachers are facing in online learning, 2) the strategies that teachers use in catering to the needs of children with special needs and 3) how effective are the strategies that the teachers used.** Analysis involved both thematic and theoretical elements to identify the concepts in the data collected. The researchers found out that one of the problems that most of the teachers encountered during their online classes is internet connection. Another problem that the teachers encountered is the support that the parents are giving to the children during online classes. Online learning for children with special needs is challenging for teachers but using online application and software’s to assist both learners and teachers makes learning attainable. Teachers have also been using games and videos in their classes online. The strategies provided by the teachers may alter depending on the learners’ strengths and weakness.

**Keywords:** Challenge; Online learning; software’s; Special needs; Teaching Strategies

## 1. Introduction

Approximately, 28 million Filipino learners have been affected by school closures to minimize the spread of COVID-19 (Santos, 2020). Filipino learners have not been inside the classroom since March of year 2020 when President Rodrigo Duterte declared a nationwide public health emergency which includes effectively keeping schools closed even until today.

Since Face-face classes are not allowed, the Department of Education (DepEd) put together distance learning options that include online platforms, offline modules, or a combination of the two, called blended or flexible learning (Santos, 2020) In online learning, teachers are rarely the lone provider of instruction (Tucker, 2010). Instead, teachers work closely with parents to help students achieve their learning objectives (Frey, 2005). All types of students, including those with disabilities, are involved in online learning (Archambault et al., 2010).

K–12 schools adapted to the abrupt closures during this time of pandemic. Online teaching methods have been widely utilized across universities, e-learning platforms, and national tuition providers. While all teachers are struggling with the new normal, special education teachers are facing unparalleled challenges transitioning both their teaching and their students and families to home-based instruction tailored to each student’s needs. “All teachers educating children with special needs are expected to provide high-quality instruction to all learners, there are mandated responsibilities through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) that affect teachers’ work. “The challenges faced by educators is the lack of available experiences that will support teachers in designing, delivering, and supporting students through online learning experiences”. (Barbour, 2012; Barbour, 2016).

During online learning, teaching strategies of teachers play important roles in the learning of the students. “Teaching strategy is a generalized plan for a lesson which includes structure, instructional objectives and an outline of planned tactics, necessary to implement the strategies”. (Stone and Morris, in Issac, 2010). Thus, because of the impact that the Covid-19 has made, teachers need to adjust their teaching strategies to be able to cater to the needs of the students online, and to be able to address the challenges teachers are facing most especially in teaching the students with special needs.

Unfortunately, there were no found empirical studies related to the online learning strategies of teachers in catering the needs of learners with special needs in the Philippines in this time of covid 19 pandemic, or any studies that would determine how teachers cater to the educational needs of the said learners in online learning: however, there are several researches that discuss the effectiveness of online learning as a tool and strategy in accommodating learners with special needs. Crouse, Rice and Mellard ( 2018) said that the teachers’ preparation that is specific to online learning and specific to students with disabilities is even more scarce. Distant learning is challenging to the students and teacher including parents. Gearing up to the new normal, it is important for teachers to know what are the possible problems that can be encountered in distant learning to be able to improve or innovate the teaching techniques. Knowing the possible teaching strategies in distant learning and their effectivity that teachers can adapt can ensure the quality of learning even in distant learning.

Thus, the researchers of this study would like to discover how teachers adapt to online learning in catering to children with special needs, strategies that will ensure quality education for every learner and that may help educators and administrators enhance more efficient and effective learning strategies for these types of learners in the new learning environment.

## 2. Methodology

Researchers collected data using qualitative method through semi-structured interviews from special education and regular teachers who handled learners with special needs across a variety of grade levels. The participants in this study were 10 teachers from public and private schools who are having their online classes. Five (5) teachers were from public school and five (5) teachers were from private schools. Some teachers worked in the same school, while others worked from different schools. These participants were identified through contacts from different teachers and different schools we have encountered and researched who are catering to children with special needs. The Teachers were contacted to verify their interest in participating and, if so, interview appointments were made. “Semi structured interview is designed to obtain objective responses from teachers about their experiences and strategies with the Phenomena. For the researchers to use this strategy it was assumed that the educators who provides online learning had sufficient knowledge of experience with the phenomenon under study”. (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). These questions were divided topically and appear in Table 2. The protocol included questions related to Experience in Education, Teaching Practices, and the use of technology. The interview method ensured participants would provide varieties of teaching strategies that are needed in this study. In accordance with agreements made with participating educators, no biographical information about individual educators will be provided. However, all participants had two or more years in education, all reported having the correct level of credential and certification necessary for their job titles. In addition, each participant was directly in charge of providing special education services. Educators identified themselves as teachers and special education professionals. Table 1 provides data information about the participating teachers.

**Table 1.** Numbers of participant job types

Job Type	Number of Participants	
	Public School	Private School
General Education Teacher	2	1
Special Education Teacher	3	4

The participants worked in schools where online learning was widely available and there were many online learning school services for children with special needs, while others worked in schools where online learning for K-12 special needs learners was new and there were few policies regarding it. As researchers sought out educators for this study, the researchers realized that it was in the best interest of online learning entities to share names of employees who were believed to be competent, even exemplary. However, this does not mean that the participants even as a group represented all online educators or that their perspectives were definitive. The researchers captured only a portion of the personal practical knowledge of educators in as many diverse settings as would agree to provide access to participants.

**Table 2.** Semi structured Interview of Topics and Typical Questions

<p><b>Experience in Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-How long have you been in education?</li><li>-Did you teach in a traditional face-to-face classroom prior to your current assignment? Can you elaborate on these experiences?</li></ul>
<p><b>Teaching Practices</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-What methods do you use to engage your students in course content online?</li><li>-What kinds of educational accommodations or modifications have you made for students with disabilities in an online course?</li><li>-If you could change one thing to meet the needs of students with special needs more effectively in an online environment, what would that be?</li><li>-What else do you think is important to know about improving the participation and success of students with disabilities in online learning?</li><li>-How do you target social involvement of learners in this new mode of teaching and learning environment?</li></ul>
<p><b>Use of Technology</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-How does technology mediate your work? -What sorts of technology would help you mediate your work?</li><li>-What software's or online applications do you suggests that would help teachers in improving learners with disability engage in online learning?</li></ul>

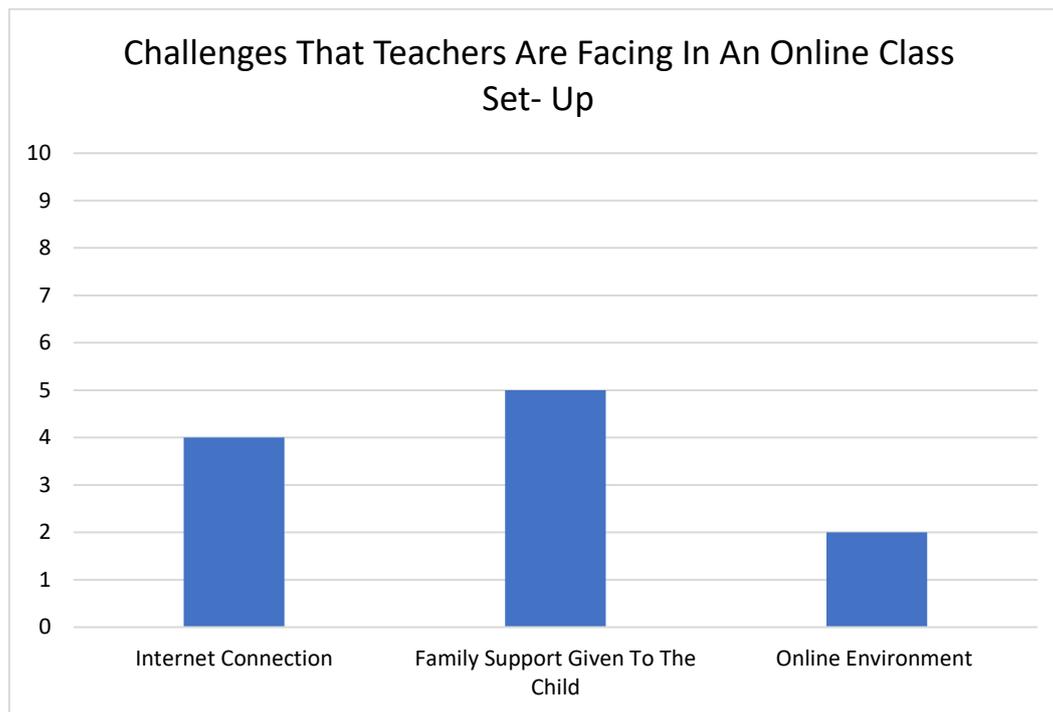
Interviews were conducted on the month of June 2021. Interviews were audio recorded or through recorded video calls and after that these were transcribed. In addition to the interview method used, a two-question survey was developed using google forms. Participating teachers received a link to the survey before having the interview. The two survey questions were about how are teachers prepared to teach students with disabilities in online learning and why? The researchers wanted to give the participants another venue where they can reveal data information to us where we are not in direct contact with them.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Teaching online is a challenging task for all teachers, especially to those who are handling children with special needs in an online class. Teachers should have a lot of strategies in teaching online in order to keep the attention and participation of the children. According to Tanis (2020), to achieve an effective teaching and learning online, teachers should carefully design the class activities that promote students' engagement with teachers, peers, and course content.

In this study, the researchers studied the problems that teachers are facing in online classes in order to determine the strategies that teachers utilized in teaching students with special needs in online class. The study also aimed to determine the effectivity of the strategies used by the teachers in teaching children with special needs in online classes.

Data gathered from teachers who served as the respondents of this study is presented in this section.

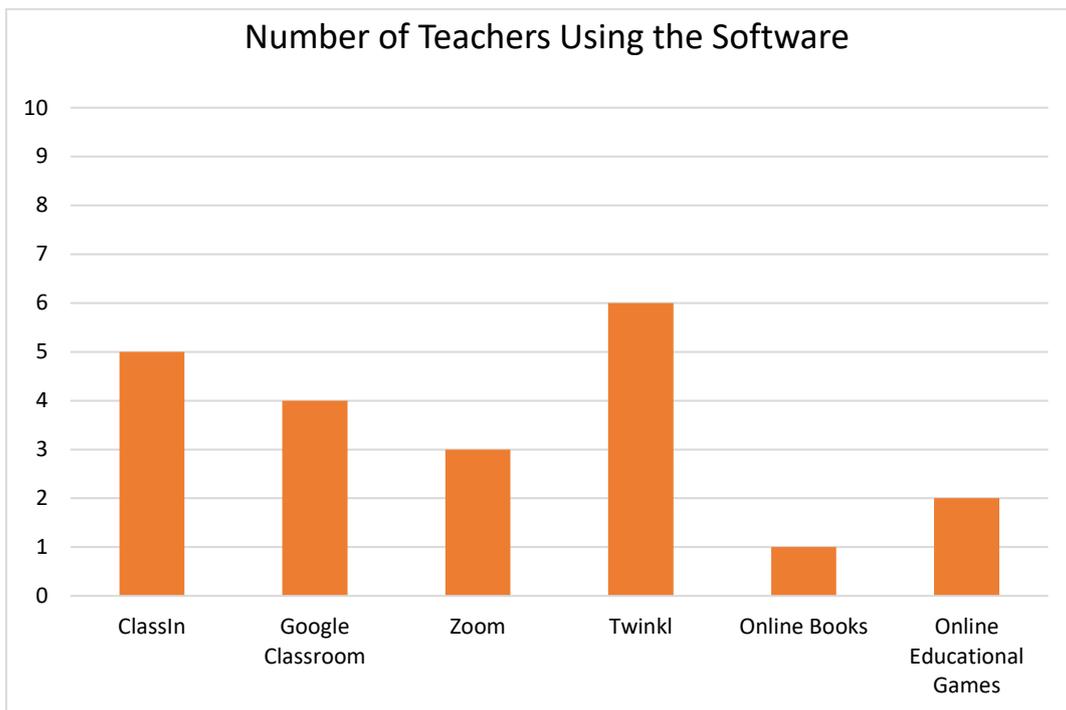


**Figure 1.** Problems that Teachers Encountered During Their Online Classes

Figure 1 shows that the first most encountered challenge during online classes is “Family support given to the child” which was chosen by 5 out of 10 teachers. This implies that most of the children are not being supported by their family during online class. Children are being left alone having their online class that caused them not to give their full participation during online class. Parents play a pivotal role in the education of the children, their involvement can make a significant difference to the learning of the children (Picton & Clark, 2012)

The second challenge that the teachers encountered is “ Internet connection” which was chosen by 4 out of 10 teachers. This implies that the class is being interrupted because of internet connection. During the interview, Three teachers said that “We only have few internet providers here in Baguio City, maybe that is the reason why they don’t give us quality service. It is important to have good connection for us to deliver the lesson properly and for us to finish our class smoothly.” Access to the internet can improve the quality of education in many ways. It opens doorways for students and teachers to a wealth of information, knowledge and educational resources, and this increases opportunities for learning in and beyond the classroom (Dogniez, 2019).

The last challenge that most teachers encountered is “Online environment” which was chosen by 2 out of 10 teachers. This implies that only few has trouble having their class in an online environment. Students can study anywhere they want as long as they have a reliable internet connection. Online learning also encourages the students to be resourceful by using alternative methods in doing their activities (Isla, 2020).



**Figure 2.** Strategies Used by Teachers in Catering Students with Special Needs in Online Class

The researchers found out that the strategies used by the teachers in catering the needs of children in online learning is using various online software such as Twinkl, ClassIn, Google Classroom, Zoom, Online Educational Games and Online Books.

Figure 2 shows that the most utilized in supporting the delivery of successful learning children with special needs is Twinkle and this is followed by the online application ClassIn. This implies that activities and manipulative and interactive online classroom applications are effective in teaching and learning in online classes. According to five respondents, “the website Twinkl allows us to access activities that are helpful to our class, these activities are fun, the students enjoy doing it and they don’t feel bored”. And five respondents also said that “ClassIn app allows our class to be alive and interactive. This app allows the students to manipulate and write in the “online blackboard”, in this way, their attention is being retained”. The use of virtual manipulatives are effective in enhancing student’s performance in terms of conceptual understanding (Shahrill & Salleh, 2016).

“Online books” are the least utilized followed by “Online educational games”. This implies that even if schools are already having online classes, they still provide books for the students and teachers to use during their online classes. Printed modules are also given to the students even if online class is already available. According to Daytaca (2020) in an online news website Inquirer.net, most families preferred a “blended learning” approach due to internet connection issues and lack of gadgets.

Nine respondents said that online software is effective in teaching students with special needs because of the features that these offers. Effectivity of each strategy may vary depending on the learners’ strengths and weaknesses. All students can learn, but each student

learn in a different way. Everyone is different, there is no one size fits all when it comes to comprehending information (Flavin, 2019).

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this study, researchers asked 10 teachers from public and private schools who are handling learners with special needs of different grade levels and subject matter concentrations to describe the strategies they used to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities through online learning and to reflect on the strategies they provide to guarantee successful learning for this kind of learners. The teachers discussed many online software applications and online tools they used to serve their students despite receiving little to no preparation in working with students with disabilities online before taking a position in the new teaching and learning environment. The limitation of this study was unable to describe specialized instructional practices for students with disabilities in online learning. Teachers in this study credited their personal attempts to draw on understandings from teaching in traditional settings, as well as professional development provided through their current working environment, as primary sources of information in regard to working with students with disabilities online. However, they wished they had access to additional professional development opportunities that would enable them to share their knowledge with others. Teachers may also benefit from targeted support that brings forward relevant traditional experience and builds on it for use within an online context. Therefore, teacher preparation programs might consider ways in which partnering and maintaining research relationships with online schools and experiences with students with disabilities will bring more prepared teachers to online learning and provide better support for sustaining these teachers in their work.

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