

Lived Experiences of Filipino Parents in the Collaborative Instructional Process for Children with Autism: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) poses significant challenges for families in supporting children's education and development. This study explored the lived experiences of parents of children with autism in Special Education (SPED) settings, drawing on perspectives from both parents and teachers to examine early intervention, school collaboration, and social adaptation. Analysis revealed three central themes: the progression from early intervention challenges to growth through SPED, shared responsibility in SPED education through sustained teacher–parent collaboration, and the transition from stigma to acceptance in parenting a child with autism. Findings indicate that parents initially faced limited intervention outcomes, emotional distress, and social stigma, but later reported improved child development and greater acceptance through structured SPED support and continuous collaboration with teachers. Despite these gains, challenges such as behavioral adjustment, time constraints, and persistent stigma remained. Overall, SPED functions as both an educational and psychosocial support system that enhances child outcomes and strengthens parental resilience.

Keywords: Phenomenology; Special Education; Autism Spectrum Disorder; Individualized Education Program; Early Intervention; Parental Experience; Collaboration; Stigma

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent differences in social communication and restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Given its heterogeneous presentation, children with ASD exhibit highly variable developmental trajectories, requiring individualized educational and behavioral supports. Globally, ASD prevalence has increased significantly, with the World Health Organization estimating that approximately 1 in 100 children are affected (World Health Organization, 2023). This rising prevalence has intensified demands on educational systems worldwide, particularly

within Special Education (SPED) programs, which are tasked with delivering tailored, inclusive, and family-responsive interventions.

Within this context, parents occupy a pivotal role that extends beyond caregiving into active participation in educational planning and intervention. Contemporary special education scholarship increasingly recognizes parent–school collaboration as a determinant of developmental and academic outcomes for children with ASD (Turnbull et al., 2015; Sheridan & Moorman Kim, 2015). This collaboration is operationalized through shared decision-making, engagement in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and reinforcement of structured learning across home and school environments. However, despite its theoretical centrality, the quality and equity of parental involvement remain uneven in practice, often shaped by systemic capacity, educator preparedness, and institutional openness to family participation (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

In low- and middle-income contexts, these challenges are further compounded by structural and sociocultural constraints. In the Philippines, strong collectivist values and family-centered orientations may facilitate caregiving commitment, yet hierarchical educational norms, stigma surrounding developmental disabilities, and unequal access to specialized services can constrain meaningful parental participation in formal SPED processes (Chiu et al., 2023). These intersecting factors position parental involvement not merely as an individual responsibility but as a socially and institutionally mediated experience.

Despite extensive literature on parental involvement in special education, existing studies predominantly emphasize intervention effectiveness, teacher perspectives, or quantitative measures of engagement. Limited attention has been given to how parents themselves experience and construct meaning around their roles as co-implementers of IEPs, particularly during critical SPED transition periods. This gap is especially pronounced in the Philippine context, where empirical accounts of lived parental experiences remain scarce.

Addressing this gap, the present phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of Filipino parents of children with ASD within SPED collaborative instructional processes. It specifically examines how parents experience their roles as co-implementers of Individualized Education Programs during the transition into formal SPED education. By foregrounding parental narratives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of family–school collaboration and informs culturally responsive, family-centered practices in special education within the Philippine context.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

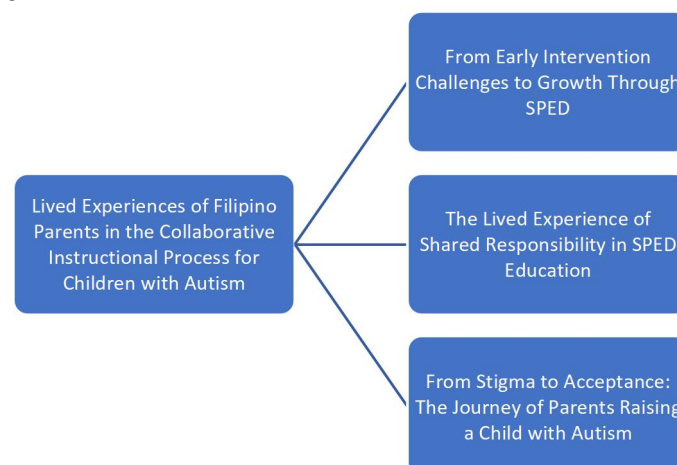


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Figure 1 presents the conceptual thematic framework illustrating the lived experiences of Filipino parents in the collaborative instructional process for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The central concept, “Lived Experiences of Filipino Parents in the Collaborative Instructional Process for Children with Autism,” is linked to three major emergent themes derived from the phenomenological analysis. These include: (1) From Early Intervention Challenges to Growth Through SPED, (2) The Lived Experience of Shared Responsibility in SPED Education, and (3) From Stigma to Acceptance: The Journey of Parents Raising a Child with Autism. Collectively, the framework demonstrates how parental experiences within SPED are shaped by developmental transitions, collaborative engagement with teachers, and socio-emotional adaptation, highlighting the interconnected nature of educational support, family involvement, and psychosocial transformation.

2. Literature Review

This chapter synthesizes literature on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), parental involvement in special education, and collaborative instructional practices within SPED contexts. Rather than treating these areas as isolated themes, the discussion integrates them to illustrate how structural, relational, and sociocultural factors shape parental participation in the education of children with ASD. The review also highlights gaps in existing research, particularly in relation to the lived experiences of Filipino parents in IEP co-implementation.

2.1 Transition Experiences of Children with ASD into Special Education

The transition of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) into formal Special Education (SPED) programs is widely recognized as a complex and dynamic process shaped by developmental variability, service accessibility, and family preparedness. Early intervention programs such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), speech therapy, and occupational therapy are widely regarded as evidence-based approaches; however, outcomes remain inconsistent due to differences in severity of symptoms, timing of diagnosis, and intensity of intervention (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012; Estes et al., 2015).

Transition is increasingly conceptualized as a developmental and relational process rather than a single institutional placement. Families often experience emotional adjustment, financial strain, and uncertainty as they move from early therapeutic services into formal schooling systems (McIntyre et al., 2010). This process involves continuous negotiation between parental expectations, child developmental needs, and institutional capacity.

In the Philippine context, transition into SPED is further influenced by limited access to early diagnostic services, uneven distribution of trained specialists, and financial constraints in accessing long-term therapy. Many families rely on delayed diagnosis and fragmented intervention pathways, which contribute to late enrollment in SPED programs and increased emotional burden on caregivers. These systemic limitations underscore the importance of schools as stabilizing environments where structured educational support becomes available.

2.2 Parents as Co-Implementers in Individualized Education Programs

Within contemporary special education frameworks, parents are recognized as essential partners in the design and implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The shift from expert-driven instruction to collaborative models reflects inclusive education paradigms that emphasize shared responsibility and distributed expertise (Epstein, 2011; Turnbull et al., 2015).

IEP participation is theoretically grounded in family-centered practice, which positions parents as co-decision-makers rather than passive recipients of professional recommendations. However, in practice, parental involvement often varies along a continuum—from passive consultation to active collaboration—depending on institutional openness and educator attitudes.

Research indicates that meaningful parental involvement in IEP processes is associated with improved academic, behavioral, and adaptive outcomes for children with ASD (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parents contribute essential contextual knowledge regarding communication patterns, behavioral triggers, and home-based learning conditions that may not be fully captured in clinical or school assessments.

Despite these benefits, several barriers limit genuine co-implementation. These include professional dominance in decision-making, technical educational language, limited training for parents in understanding IEP documentation, and time constraints during meetings. As a result, many parents experience IEP participation as procedural compliance rather than meaningful collaboration, reducing their sense of agency (Fish, 2008; Lo, 2012).

In Philippine SPED settings, these challenges are often intensified by hierarchical teacher–parent relationships shaped by cultural norms of respect for authority and deference to educators. Parents may hesitate to question professional recommendations, even when they have valuable insights about their child. This dynamic creates an imbalance in shared decision-making, limiting the full realization of collaborative IEP implementation.

2.3 Collaborative Instructional Practices in Sociocultural Contexts

Effective education for learners with ASD requires consistency across home and school environments, making collaboration between parents and educators essential for intervention success. Structured communication, shared instructional strategies, and coordinated behavioral reinforcement improve learning continuity and skill generalization (Iovannone et al., 2003).

However, collaboration is deeply shaped by sociocultural context. In collectivist societies such as the Philippines, parental engagement is influenced by values such as respect for authority, *pakikisama* (smooth interpersonal relationships), and *hiya* (sense of shame or social propriety). These cultural orientations may promote trust and compliance but can also limit parental assertiveness in educational decision-making (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000).

Stigma surrounding developmental disabilities further complicates engagement. Parents may experience social judgment, misunderstanding, or isolation, which can delay help-seeking behavior and reduce participation in school-based interventions (Chiu et al., 2023). At the same time, increasing awareness and exposure to disability advocacy programs are gradually shifting public perceptions toward greater acceptance.

At the institutional level, SPED implementation is constrained by teacher workload, limited training, high student-to-teacher ratios, and uneven availability of intervention resources. In many cases, family–school collaboration depends more on individual teacher initiative than on structured institutional systems. This results in inconsistent implementation of collaborative practices across schools.

Within this context, parental involvement in SPED is not merely a procedural requirement but a negotiated practice shaped by cultural expectations, institutional capacity, and family resilience.

2.4 Synthesis and Research Gap

Across the literature, parental involvement is consistently identified as a critical component of effective special education. Studies emphasize its positive impact on academic achievement, behavioral

development, and social adaptation in children with ASD. However, existing research largely focuses on outcomes of parental involvement rather than the subjective experiences of parents themselves.

While collaboration is widely promoted in policy and educational frameworks, its actual implementation remains uneven due to emotional, structural, and cultural constraints. In particular, less attention has been given to how parents experience, interpret, and construct meaning around their participation in IEP implementation and SPED transition processes.

In the Philippine context, this gap is more pronounced due to limited phenomenological studies exploring parental lived experiences within SPED systems. Existing literature tends to emphasize service delivery and child outcomes, with minimal focus on parental agency, emotional journeys, and culturally embedded experiences of collaboration.

2.5 The Present Study

To address this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Filipino parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the collaborative instructional process. Specifically, it examines parental experiences in SPED transition and IEP co-implementation within real educational contexts.

By foregrounding lived narratives, the study aims to contribute a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of family-school collaboration in a developing country setting. It also seeks to extend current scholarship by highlighting parental meaning-making, agency, and adaptation within SPED systems, thereby informing more inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices.

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Filipino parents in the collaborative instructional process for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), with particular focus on SPED transition and their roles as co-implementers of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). This approach was selected to capture how participants interpret and ascribe meaning to their lived educational experiences within a shared phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Method to ensure a systematic and rigorous interpretation of participants' narratives.

A descriptive phenomenological design was used to examine how parents experience and interpret their involvement in SPED transition and IEP co-implementation. This design is appropriate for capturing subjective meaning, emotional experiences, and contextual interpretations while allowing the researcher to bracket prior assumptions and focus on the essence of lived experience. Colaizzi's method guided the analysis through systematic extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, and development of an exhaustive description of the phenomenon.

The study was conducted at Iligan City Educare Learning Center in Iligan City, Philippines, a specialized institution providing educational services for children with special educational needs, including ASD. The center implements individualized instruction and promotes active parent involvement, making it a suitable setting for examining collaborative instructional processes between parents and educators.

Participants consisted of three Filipino parents of children diagnosed with ASD who were enrolled in the SPED program of the selected institution. Inclusion criteria required that participants be primary caregivers of children formally diagnosed with ASD and have at least two years of involvement in SPED education and home-school collaboration. To strengthen the credibility of findings, three SPED teachers

were included as secondary participants for triangulation, providing additional insight into parent–teacher collaboration and supporting validation of emerging themes.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Parents were chosen based on sustained involvement in SPED education, while teachers were selected based on experience handling learners with ASD and engaging in collaborative instructional practices with families.

Data were gathered using researcher-developed semi-structured interview guides aligned with the study objectives. One guide was used for parents, and another for SPED teachers to support triangulation. The instruments were validated by experts in special education and qualitative research to ensure clarity and relevance. Interviews were conducted in English and Cebuano/Bisaya depending on participant preference, with translation and back-translation procedures applied to preserve meaning. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and supplemented by field notes and a reflective journal.

Prior to data collection, ethical approval and institutional permission were obtained. Participants were fully informed about the study purpose, procedures, and their rights, including voluntary participation and withdrawal at any time, and written informed consent was secured. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted in a private and quiet setting within the school, each lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, with Cebuano/Bisaya responses translated into English while preserving contextual meaning. Follow-up teacher interviews were conducted to support triangulation, and participants were invited to review summaries of findings to ensure accuracy and confirm interpretive validity.

Data analysis followed Colaizzi’s Seven-Step Method. Transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity, after which significant statements were extracted and meanings were formulated. These were organized into theme clusters based on conceptual similarity, which were then integrated into an exhaustive description of parental experiences. This was further distilled into the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. Member checking was used to validate interpretations, and triangulation with teacher accounts strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researchers. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time without consequence. The study minimized risk by conducting interviews in a respectful and supportive manner, considering the emotional sensitivity of experiences related to raising children with ASD. Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection.

4. Results and Discussion

The lived experiences of parents raising children with autism in SPED settings were analyzed and synthesized into three emergent themes, with findings further strengthened through triangulation with teachers’ perspectives to enhance the credibility and richness of the interpretation.

4.1 From Early Intervention Challenges to Growth Through SPED

Parents initially described struggles with behavioral management, unmet developmental expectations, and minimal progress from early therapeutic interventions, which led to uncertainty, emotional distress, and difficulty understanding their child’s needs. Over time, enrollment in SPED became a turning point where parents observed gradual improvements in learning, communication, and behavior, although challenges related to academic structure and behavioral adjustment persisted. Throughout this journey,

sustained collaboration with teachers and school personnel emerged as a crucial factor in supporting parental understanding and the child's developmental progress.

The participants shared a common lived experience of uncertainty, struggle, and limited progress during early interventions, which eventually led them to transition their children into SPED programs. One parent described persistent difficulties in managing behavior despite therapy, stating, *"It was really a struggle for me to control his behavior because many times he was not understood, and we also underwent therapies but we did not see much progress, so at the age of 6 we decided to enroll him in SPED,"* while another expressed dissatisfaction with intervention outcomes, saying, *"He started ABA, but we stopped because there was no good progress."* Similarly, another participant highlighted prolonged home-based and occupational therapy efforts that remained challenging due to behavioral concerns and environmental constraints, ultimately resulting in SPED enrollment at age seven. Upon transition, parents initially experienced hesitation and adjustment difficulties, as reflected in the statement, *"I was very hesitant at first because I did not know how to handle my son and I was afraid I might be scolded by the principal,"* but later expressed gratitude for SPED support, noting that it benefited both the child and the parents. Across accounts, SPED was perceived as a more structured and responsive environment that facilitated improved learning, socialization, and teacher-guided behavior management, with one parent emphasizing that *"it became easier to give instructions and teach because he listens more to the teacher than to me,"* underscoring the crucial role of teacher involvement in the transition process.

Teachers further highlighted that parents often enter the SPED journey with feelings of denial, confusion, and emotional distress, particularly during early intervention and enrollment stages. They noted that many parents initially struggle to accept and understand their child's condition, which affects their engagement in intervention processes. However, through structured parent orientations, support groups, and continuous home-school collaboration, parents gradually develop awareness and become more active in supporting their child's learning. Teachers also emphasized that consistent communication and home reinforcement are essential in sustaining child progress and easing the transition into SPED services.

These findings suggest that while early intervention is essential, its effectiveness may be limited when implementation is inconsistent or not reinforced across environments. Such gaps contribute to ongoing developmental delays and emotional strain among parents, often prompting the transition toward SPED as a more structured and supportive educational setting. Within SPED, children demonstrate more stable progress in communication, behavior, and learning; however, adjustment to academic demands and behavioral routines remains an ongoing process. Overall, the experience reflects a gradual shift from uncertainty and struggle toward understanding, structure, and collaborative support in addressing the child's developmental needs.

Supporting literature reinforces these findings. Hyman et al. (2020) emphasize that early intervention for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder should be intensive, individualized, and consistently implemented across settings to optimize developmental outcomes. However, evidence from the National Autism Center (2015) and Rogers and Vismara (2008) indicates that while interventions such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) can improve developmental outcomes, they are most effective when integrated with structured educational support. In this regard, Special Education (SPED) services provide a comprehensive framework that combines academic instruction, behavioral strategies, and

developmental skill-building, aligning with parents' reported experiences of improved outcomes following SPED enrollment.

4.2 The Lived Experience of Shared Responsibility in SPED Education

Communication between parents and teachers emerges as a central element sustaining collaboration and ensuring consistency in implementing interventions across home and school environments. Despite various challenges, consistent parental participation strengthens learning continuity and reinforces the effectiveness of SPED interventions.

Parenting within SPED was described as a continuous process of adjustment, shared responsibility, and active learning, where collaboration with teachers is translated into daily home-based practices. One participant reported that they gradually *"adjusted and followed school instructions like limiting screen time,"* emphasizing acceptance and alignment with school expectations, while another highlighted role differentiation within the household, noting that the husband took a more active role in *"disciplining the child and assisting with chores and assignments,"* as the parent tended to be more lenient. A single-parent participant similarly described sustained effort to implement teacher instructions despite work demands, stating that they reinforce learning at home through simple chores such as *"sweeping or watering plants"* and through community exposure like *"going to the plaza or bringing the child during grocery shopping."* Participants also emphasized the school's role in supporting this process, describing SPED as providing *"practical and holistic learning focused on daily life skills and academics,"* while ensuring *"consistent discipline"* and offering *"guidance and awareness"* that helped parents better understand and manage their child's behavior. Communication with teachers was consistently described as direct, accessible, and supportive, with one participant noting *"constant communication"* and another highlighting that teachers are *"easy to reach out to when concerns arise,"* often reinforced by a collaborative support system. Despite these supports, participants identified key challenges in fulfilling their role as co-implementers, particularly time constraints due to work, behavioral difficulties such as mood changes and tantrums, and inconsistency in implementing tasks at home, as one participant explained that *"time is the most challenging part because I am working,"* while another noted that the child can be *"moody and difficult to manage when instructed."* Reflecting on their involvement, participants emphasized that active participation had a meaningful impact on their child's progress, particularly through consistent presence in school activities, shared caregiving roles at home, and community exposure that strengthened life skills such as learning to *"wait, choose items, and behave appropriately in public spaces,"* underscoring the importance of sustained home-school collaboration in reinforcing development.

Teacher triangulation further corroborated these accounts, emphasizing that effective SPED engagement is rooted in continuous collaboration between teachers and parents, where shared planning, consistent communication, and home reinforcement collectively shape the child's learning experience despite variations in parental capacity and participation.

This is supported by the principles of Family-School Partnership in Special Education (Sheridan & Moorman Kim, 2015; Turnbull et al., 2015), which stress that optimal outcomes in SPED depend on strong collaboration between parents and teachers in implementing consistent strategies across environments. Research further shows that active parental involvement significantly enhances children's academic, behavioral, and adaptive functioning, particularly when reinforcement is consistently applied at home and school (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Turnbull et al., 2015). In addition, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) framework highlights the importance of shared responsibility in achieving

developmental goals through coordinated planning and implementation (Fish, 2008; Lo, 2012). These perspectives align with the participants' experiences, where continuous communication, parental engagement, and teacher guidance collectively support child development despite contextual and logistical challenges (Epstein, 2011; Turnbull et al., 2015).

4.3 From Stigma to Acceptance: The Journey of Parents Raising a Child with Autism

Experiences in raising a child with autism progress from stigma, labeling, and misunderstanding to acceptance, resilience, and meaning-making, as early judgment and isolation evolve into awareness, advocacy, and supportive community engagement. Central to this transformation is the role of SPED education as a critical support system that strengthens both child development and parental coping. Despite these positive shifts, participants consistently emphasized the continuing need for broader societal acceptance and accessible emotional support services for families.

Participants described an initial stage marked by social rejection, emotional distress, and fear of judgment. Parents reported labeling and discrimination from community members, leading to isolation and, in some cases, withdrawal from social interaction. Over time, exposure to SPED services, greater awareness, and community support contributed to adjustment, acceptance, and resilience. Parents also noted a shift in self-perception, where caregiving became linked to responsibility, love, and personal growth.

One parent shared experiences of stigma: *"Many people called my child abnormal. They laughed at him and bullied him,"* which later motivated advocacy and awareness efforts, while another described withdrawal: *"We were afraid he would be judged,"* noting that neighbors often labeled the child *"abnormal."* In contrast, one parent reported support: *"Our community is mostly relatives, and they have always been supportive."* Regarding support systems, a participant said: *"Awareness initiatives help not only parents but everyone in the community,"* while another added: *"The benefits and discounts have been a big help for our family,"* despite the difficulty of accepting the diagnosis. On meaning-making, one parent shared: *"You learn unconditional love,"* while another reflected: *"The diagnosis felt like my world collapsed,"* but later found motivation to persevere. A participant explained identity transformation: *"You cannot afford to be weak because your child depends on you,"* while another added: *"Even my child's small achievements bring me great happiness."* Teachers observed that parents often move from denial to engagement, noting that *"many parents initially experience denial, fear, and confusion but gradually become more involved through continuous communication and awareness activities."*

This reflects triangulation, as both parent and teacher perspectives corroborate the progression from stigma-driven withdrawal to acceptance and engagement, underscoring the role of SPED services and collaborative support.

The findings suggest that parental experiences are evolving, shaped by social context and institutional support. Initial stigma often leads to distress, secrecy, and withdrawal, but sustained interaction with SPED services, greater awareness, and supportive relationships foster resilience, identity redefinition, and acceptance. Parenting a child with autism becomes a transformative process linked to emotional growth, responsibility, and meaning-making. These findings reflect Social Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963), which explains how courtesy stigma results in exclusion and discrimination, and Social Support Theory (Luther et al., 2005; McStay et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2022), which highlights the role of emotional, informational, and community support in coping and well-being. Literature also underscores the importance of SPED services in providing structured intervention, guidance, and resources that

enhance child development and family adjustment (Epstein, 2011; Turnbull et al., 2015). Finally, the Family Resilience Framework (Walsh, 2016) aligns with participants' accounts of acceptance, resilience, and redefined parental roles in caregiving.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the lived experiences of parents raising children with autism within SPED contexts, revealing a dynamic journey shaped by early intervention challenges, collaborative school-home engagement, and socio-emotional transformation. Parents initially encountered limited progress and emotional distress during early interventions but later experienced improved child development through structured SPED support. The findings further underscore the critical role of sustained teacher-parent collaboration in ensuring continuity of learning and behavioral reinforcement across settings. Moreover, parents' experiences reflect a broader transition from stigma and uncertainty toward acceptance, resilience, and advocacy, although challenges related to societal awareness and emotional support remain. Overall, SPED emerges not only as an educational intervention but also as a vital support system that strengthens both child outcomes and parental adaptation.

6. Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should explore the long-term experiences of families involved in SPED programs using longitudinal studies that track changes in parental identity, resilience, and advocacy over time. Comparative studies between families using SPED services and those relying only on early intervention or community-based support may also help identify differences in outcomes. In addition, research should examine how culture and socio-economic status influence stigma, acceptance, and access to support systems. Further studies could also focus on how teacher-parent collaboration works in practice, how awareness programs help reduce stigma, and how extended family and community support contribute to parental adjustment. Lastly, policy-focused research is needed to assess the accessibility of SPED services, financial benefits, and emotional support systems in order to improve programs that support both children and their families.

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