Experiences of Students with Additional Needs Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic: A Meta-Synthesis

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Abstract
Students with exceptionalities encountered difficulties in adapting to the new normal of education, especially in online learning. Effective actions were identified in adjusting and coping with the sudden change. This systematic review meta-synthesized the experiences of students with additional needs in the commencing of the global pandemic, COVID-19. Publish and Perish software was used to collect data, and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist was utilized to select studies, which were organized using the PRISMA flow diagram. Clark and Braune's six-step thematic analysis was employed in which eight themes emerged, namely: behavioral management, social, financial, mental and other health problems, special education and other related services; teachers and school personnel's negligence; accommodation; support system; and lack of accessibility. Social barriers and educational resources were the two meta-themes of the study. Learners with disabilities' well-being and academic performance were influenced by two main elements: social obstacles and the provision of resources for the learners which led to a range of experiences, difficulties, and problems. It is recommended that the government make accessible support for students with disabilities, provide professional training for teachers, emphasize stakeholder collaboration in supporting students, and ensure that students with exceptionalities' well-being are regularly checked.
Keywords: *Experiences, Students with disabilities, Students with Additional Needs, Covid-19 pandemic, Students with exceptionalities*

I. Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) began in the year 2019 month of December and was first discovered in Wuhan, Hubei, China. An unseen foe that has impacted millions of lives; is a pneumonitis of unknown origin that alters the individual's lifestyle. COVID-19 affected most individuals' welfare: financially, emotionally, and mentally, and caused a great threat to the declining economic rate and other government sectors, especially education (Mohan & Nambiar, 2019; Innocenti, 2021). To alleviate the impact of the epidemic, the government united to implement the closure of numerous establishments, institutions, and other corporations and proposed to widely limit social interaction, which was called lockdown. The government also re-enforces police power that gives them authority, which strengthens security and power that protects the welfare of Filipino citizens and the country's sake (Jiang et al, 2022; Capatides, 2020).

The global lockdown was implemented to prevent more casualties caused by the virus. While it reduced the affected rate, it severely disrupted several sectors, including education, which was forced to close, and both teachers and students were subjected to an unprepared transition to the new normal education and the sudden modification of the curriculum (Donnelly et al., 2021). This disrupts students' learning, internal assessments, and other things that were detrimental to the learners' development, which showed a negative impact on education (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). According to the United Nations (2020) census, 94% of the student population was affected by the sudden closure of institutions, estimated to be 1.6 billion students and approximately 23.8 million students who either stopped or dropped out. Ekin and Rhim (2021) reported that students with additional needs experienced a different quality of education than regular students and did not receive or were limited to special services because of limited interaction. These students with disabilities also experienced difficulty in the sudden change of instruction set, especially those individuals who needed extra attention, and they often failed to submit and do tasks. In addition, it was reported that the districts and other authorities had difficulty addressing the needs of students with disabilities in the new mode of learning.

In Asian countries, specifically Indonesia, Hanjarwati, and Siwi (2021) found that educators used unfriendly tools and platforms that were inaccessible to deaf and speech-impaired students. This hurdle only lasts for the first three months of the school year. The learners communicated with their respective teachers and asked volunteers from the Defatable Service Center (PLD) for help. Qatar Foundation (2021) revealed the practices Qatar used in education during the pandemic. Even though the lessons were delivered through online programs and devices, children with disabilities in Qatar reported that they rarely studied at home. While schools were closed, thirty-two percent of the children were able to study for at least an hour and twenty-seven percent of the children studied for more than an hour, while respondents said that fifteen percent of the children did not learn. Most parents and teachers acknowledged that their children with disabilities experienced a loss of friendship, loneliness, and boredom during distance learning. In India, Nazir (2021), a journalist, reported a case of some students with special needs. Visually impaired students had difficulty using computer screens and reading, especially with the use of digital tools, and the vision of the child might be lost if the continuity of e-learning is being pursued by the government. Another child who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy had stopped taking her online courses because she could not keep up with the pace of her online education. Au and Man (2006) stated that the impact of the Corona Virus Disease 2019 or COVID-19 made it possible for schools to close and a state of public health emergency to be declared, especially in the Philippines. Students with disabilities were greatly affected and encountered the following: social exclusion amid the pandemic's emergence of online schooling; the lack of internet connectivity; and the limitations of assistive devices. Velasco (2021) stated that persons with disabilities (PWDs) were one of the most vulnerable populations susceptible to marginalization. They survived due to a strong support network behind them.

Few studies explored the predicaments of learners with exceptionalities in the field of education. On the contrary, there were no meta-synthesis studies have been conducted. Hence, this research meta-synthesized the experiences of students with additional needs (SWANS) amidst a pandemic with the following objectives: (a) identify challenges of SWANS in the transition of education during a pandemic; (b) describe the advantages and disadvantages of online learning for SWANS; and (c) determine the action taken in coping with the transition of education amidst a pandemic.

II.   Methodology

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative approach that meta-synthesized the experiences of students who had additional needs during the pandemic. Meta-synthesis is a research design used to collect insightful information and interpret existing qualitative research findings, primarily on re-conceptualizing people's experiences. (Atkins et al, 2008; Chrastina, 2018)

Data Gathering Procedure

This study used Publish and Perish software to gather data using only one specific website, Google Scholar. The software can produce a maximum of 1000 searched data points, which helps the researcher's acquisition of information. Due to the maximum number of sources, the researchers further seek additional information outside the software but on the same website. Some sources were deleted due to irrelevant and unreliable information. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, also known as the CASP checklist for qualitative design, was utilized in the study to check the trustworthiness of the research. The researchers mapped out the summary of records of the sources that were included and excluded through the PRISMA Flow Chart. Also, in analyzing the data, thematic analysis was employed in this study.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The study's inclusion and exclusion criteria served as the basis of the research data, which set standards for the qualification of the needed information. The following were the criteria for the study: (a) the source's title must be relevant to the research about the experiences of students with disabilities amidst the pandemic; (b) it must be published between 2019 and 2022; (c) must be at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic; (d) must pass the CASP or Critical Appraisal Skills Programme Checklist; (e) relates to at least two of the research objectives, and the research data must be removed if: (f) no sources stated; and (g) had unclear findings.

Data Analysis

The data on the experiences of students with additional needs at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic employed thematic analysis which was used to classify and identify the important context of data acquired to form a comprehensive theme and utilize it in addressing the problems raised at the beginning of the research (Clarke & Braun, 2006; Creswell, 2012). Clarke and Braun (2016) identified six steps in analyzing data: (1) familiarity with the acquired data; (2) coding; (3) generating of themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) describing or defining themes; and (6) writing up.

III. Results and Discussion

In accordance with the research objectives, the results were analyzed based on the selected studies. Social barriers, which influenced the learners' characteristics, and the roles of educational resources and support systems were developed as meta-themes with eight sub-themes.
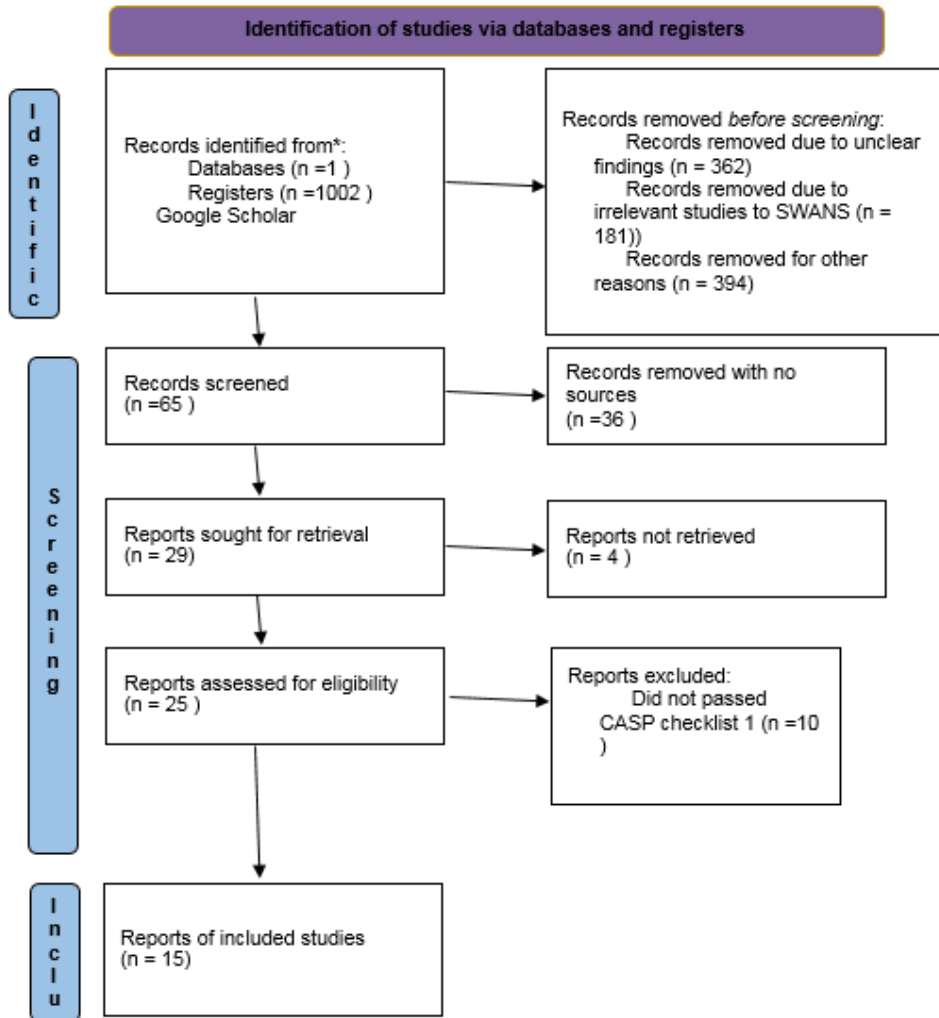

Figure 1. Search Strategy using PRISMA

Figure 1 shows the flow in the acquisition and selection of research data using the PRISMA Flow Diagram, in which the process was divided into three phases: identification, screening, and inclusion. It also determined the reasons for the removal of certain studies.

In the first phase, the identification stage, there were 1000 studies registered in Google Scholar taken using the application software, Publish and Perish, and two studies from the actual website, totaling 1002 studies on the same database. 362 studies were removed due to unclear findings, 181 studies were deleted because they were irrelevant and did not talk about students with additional needs (SWANS), and another 394 were removed for other reasons like topics that were completely irrelevant and unconnected to the study or not within the scope of the research conducted by the researchers. This results in a total of 65 remaining studies in the identification stage.

In the second phase, there were three screening sub-stages: 36 studies were omitted because no sources were given, which resulted in 29 studies left for the next sub-stage; there were four records that were not retrieved, which resulted in 25 studies; on the third sub-stage, 10 studies were excluded because they did not pass the CASP Checklist, resulting in 15 studies in the final phase.

Table 1. Studies focusing on the Experiences of Students with Additional Needs Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Table 1 depicts fifteen studies that were collated and compiled on a descriptive table. Each study entails codes and the latter were clustered in creating themes and meta-themes.

No.	Author/s	Year	Code
1	Dianito, A. J., Duran, J., Espinosa, J., & Tus, J.	2021	• Social exclusions • Challenged by limited assistive technologies • Adjustment problems in transition • Miscommunication • Social and Financial Issues • Susceptibility to Cognitive and Mental Issues • Healthy Support System
2	Brownell, S., Cooper, K., Gin, L., & Guerrero, F.	2021	• Inability to access accommodations and other resources • Resource centers neglections • Lack of reduced-distraction testing environment • Inaccessible resource centers • Extended Time for exams was not implemented • Lack Access of Assistive technologies • Reduced access to tutoring • Technology issues • Reduced access to material or information • Instructors refusal to consider the situations of Students with Special Needs • Inappropriate integration of accommodation • Teachers encouraging students to do self-accommodations • Self-support or self-help • Protection from legislations
3	Bellomo, T., Laventhal, N., Prasad, S., & Munzer, T.	2020	• Medical Care disruption • Potential exacerbation of ASD Symptoms • Limited access to therapy • Decrease in support services • Healthy Support System from family • Collaboration of professionals and parents
4	Dickinson, H., & Yates, S.	2020	• Poor mental health • Financial Issues • Lack of Acess to Information and lessons • Degrade in access of Support Services • Parents as substitute of teachers
5	Charlifue-Smith, R., Leech, N., Phan, N., & Steed, E. A.	2021	• Undelivered quality services • Received modified SPED services • Family members as substitute teachers • Absence of specialized educators • IEP is revised but not fully executed • Lack of online platforms • Lack of technological devices • One-on-one services
6	Carta, S. M., Cataudella, S., Masala, C., Masala, I., Mascia, M. L., Penna, M. P., Petretto, D. R., Piras, P., & Pistis, I.	2021	• Lack of accessibility in learning materials and information • Accommodation not attained • Lack of assistive technologies • Adaptation of digitalized learning materials
7	Cahapay, M., & Rotas, E.	2020	• Financial Issues • Unstable Internet Connectivity • Inadequate learning resources • Electric power interruptions • Vague learning contents • Overloaded lesson activities • Poor peer communication • Conflict at home • Poor learning environment • Financial problems • Physical compromises • Poor Mental Health
8	Nusser, L.	2021	• Low achievement level • Parents became educational allies (parental involvement) • Lack of motivation in learning

			• Less learning activities • Short span of allotted time in learning • Healthy Support System from the family
9	Begeny, J., Soriano-Ferrer, M., Piedra-Martinez, E., & Morte-Soriano, M. R.	2021	• Poor Mental Health • Depressed • Anxiety • Conduct Problems • Lack of motivation learning • Lack of support from educators • Lack of assistive devices or tools • Difficulty in establishing study routine • Parents acted as one of educational allies
10	Al-Mawee, W., Gharaibeh, T., & Kwayu, K. M.	2021	• Lack of social interaction • Location flexibility • Time flexibility • Lack of peer communication • Lack of self-motivation • Poor internet Connections • Problems using Online systems • Lack of concentration
11	Jalongo, M. R.	2021	• Integration and reliance on technology • Reduce opportunities in social interaction • Financial Issues • Disruption to the continuity of learning • Reduction in instructional time
12	Umucu, E., & Lee, B.	2020	• Behavioral disengagement • Problems in behavior management • Easily distracted • Poor Mental Health
13	Parida, M., & Sinha, M.	2021	• Limited social interaction • Less access to social media • Less access to technological platforms • Reduction of educational services • Inadequate presence of assistive technology
14	Gurgur, H., & Yazcayir, G.	2021	• Lack of access to internet connection • Less number of attendees in online classes • No updates and evaluation made by teachers after activities • No support of educational services • No communication coming from the teachers and school administrators • Lack of interest and motivation in learning
15	Dickinson, H., Smith, C., Yates, S., & Bertuol, M.	2020	• Reduction in behavior support • Decrease in accessibility to health specialists • Inadequate educational support • Unable to engage in online classes • Isolation from peers • Negative impact on mental health • IEP not executed and followed • Instructional materials are the same as with regular students • Inadequate learning materials • Accommodations and Modifications were not performed • IEP not updated, followed nor executed

As shown in table 1, several problems emerged in the educational experiences of learners with disabilities. One of the most common issues encountered during the transition to the new normal is the negative approach of the teachers. As stated by Gurgur and Yazcayir (2021) that due to teachers' negligence in duties and responsibilities, students were greatly affected and suffered consequences. Lack of communication also posed a big issue in which teachers became unreachable due to several barriers such as connectivity status, technology problems, and financial capabilities. Furthermore, in regard to distance and isolated learning, the integration of technology as a medium of addressing the needs of the learners like the implementation of digitalized instruction and materials (Carta et al., 2021).

Theme 1. Behavioral Management

Behavioral Management is one of the most crucial aspects of an individual, especially for those who have special needs as it affects how they perceive and react to external and internal stressors. However, when the pandemic hit the world, it affected the students with additional needs, and were left with no choice but to undergo a sudden transition to online learning. A study by Umucu, E., & Lee, B. (2020) who examined the level of stress of SWANS during the pandemic revealed that there is behavioral disengagement and a rise in the number of venting occurrences is evident. Parents of children with additional needs were asked to describe the impact of COVID-19 on their own behavior management and that of their child. Both parents and children appear to be experiencing loss, worry, and changes in mood and behavior as a result of the rapid social changes that have occurred. Some parents reported feeling overwhelmed and described the impact of child's understanding and awareness.

Theme 2. Social and Financial Problems

It was widely known that the COVID-19 Pandemic had a significant impact, particularly on students with disabilities, and on social and financial issues. According to the findings of Dianito, Duran, Espinosa and Tus (2021), students with exceptionality felt that they were socially excluded from society, prior to the implementation of the new normal education. There were activities that benefited the students but not those with disabilities since they have difficulty in terms of mobility which limits their participation. There were also existing social barriers like poor communication and a lack of social interaction. There were also individuals who did not often respond to messages on social media. This shows that the new normal of education negatively affects the social domain of the students. In the study of Rotas and Cahapay (2020), the learning environment of the students did not promote a comfortable learning space since they were distracted at home or in the computer shop. There were also conflicts arising in terms of responsibilities, which disrupted the students' management. Financial issues augmented the individual problems since most of the students with disabilities relied on themselves and often encountered insufficiency in cash assistance or allowance. Also, students from low-income families faced difficulties in addressing their needs since the budget could not also support their educational needs.

Theme 3. Mental Issues and Other Health Problems

It is a priority for students with additional needs to maintain well-being, specifically mental health, as this greatly affects how they function, react, and cope with societal changes. However, due to COVID-19, the services that adhere to this aspect of students with additional needs were disrupted. In the study by Dickinson (2020), it has been found that there was a massive cancellation of support and medical services for students with disabilities during the pandemic, and this resulted in anxiety and a decline in their mental health. Other external factors like lack of facilities, accessibility, intermittent internet connection, and a weak support system were some of the contributors to this problem. As mental health care stopped, professionals also failed to check the status of individuals who have exceptionalities from time to time, thus giving these students a piece of advice on coping with problems and stress during the pandemic. Due to this, students with additional needs reacted in different ways, and their physical health was also compromised. Their interest in learning decreased, and the motivation to continue studying was nowhere to be found.

Theme 4. Special Education Services and Other Related Services

Special education convocation benefit all students with disabilities who have opportunities to grasp and demonstrate their talents and intellect. Findings from Charlifue, Mith, Leech, Phan, and Steed (2021) found that early childhood special education teachers and associated services staff were encouraged to provide distance special education to children with disabilities by allowing teachers to change the time and type of special education convocation reported having provided, this includes the therapeutics huddle conveyed via telemedicine. In addition, some students with additional needs did not receive personalized service. Dianito, Duran, Espinosa, and Tus (2021) stated that access to health services was one of the most critical demands of persons with disabilities (PWD) during the pandemic and the same for individuals with pre-existing comorbidities. Disabled living programs in various government departments also provide health care services along with skills and entrepreneurship training and economic support. While these programs were very useful, they could only serve a limited figure of people with disabilities and had to meet certain conditions.

Theme 5. Negligence of Academic Teachers and School Personnel

The analysis identified several issues, with the crisis in building connections among teachers, students, and relatives, and the absence of cooperation in distance learning for students with special needs during the pandemic quarantine period. I was. Similarly, teachers and other crucial staff were reportedly unable to touch children with special needs and their families. Parents also had to try to inform their children at household without professional or institutional help and felt neglected in this process. It severely impacted the learning process and

resulted in significant learning gaps (Gurgur et al. 2021). A study found that children with special needs and their families should be provided with additional distance learning through redeeming and preliminary classes with special needs literacy and modification as needed. rice field. Healthcare providers announced feeling concerned about the pandemic, feeling loaded by assignments and costs, and worried about the children and families they were helping. Employees with children at home conveyed additional significance from promoting their own children's distance learning while trying to provide remote services to students. The COVID-19 pandemic has constructed a recent level of heed among special educators along with affiliated care providers. Adopting advanced models of virtual assistance delivery and not knowing how these technologies are being received by children and families. This negative effect on anxiety and job performance was replicated by candidates (Charlifue et al., 2021). And particular key ingredient for successful inclusive education is building and maintaining partnerships between schools, teachers, families, and students.

Theme 6. Educational Accommodation and Support

In the article released by IRISCENTER (2022), it has been emphasized that accommodation refers to the adjustments or changes in educational settings or practices that help students overcome obstacles posed by disabilities. It was one of the most crucial things to successfully deliver for students with disabilities as it will greatly affect their performance in schools. However, educational accommodation and support for students with special needs were not fully attained during the COVID-19 pandemic. Brownell (2021) found out that the loss of extension of time while taking exams and tests was one of the struggles students with additional needs experienced. This was due to the sudden transition of instruction and most of the activities were digitalized, making the learners with exceptionalities overwhelmed and not able to keep the same pace as regular students. Various accommodations were also not delivered in different countries, such as fewer encounters with tutoring, a decline in one-on-one services, not thoroughly discussed learning contents, and overloaded lesson activities. As a result, students with additional needs had a low educational performance.

Theme 7. Support System

A support system plays a vital role in helping students with special needs achieve their full potential because all students need encouragement and support, and for students with disabilities, a welcoming environment will help them feel at ease and ensure that they can freely express their thoughts and opinions in class. Students with special needs learn in unique ways, and their additional needs make it challenging for them to pick up new skills, function independently, or comprehend complex information without a support system, they likely show less enthusiasm in studying, had poor performance, and was uncooperative during class discussions. Since the implementation of remote learning, teaching did not give proper assistance to the parents and to the learners with disabilities, this leads to families' fear for the development of their children (Begeny et. al., 2021; Dickinson & Yates, 2020). But still, parents as the primary source of support can push for the continuity of assistance for their kids in adult and educational settings. Although having a positive outlook would not fix the child's disability-related issues, it can give them hope and assurance that things can change and will eventually succeed. Thus, having a solid and well-established support system is essential for learners to preserve their mental health and cope with life's challenges. In fact, research shows that having a network of social support has several benefits, such as promoting excellent mental health and boosting the ability to face challenging circumstances (Charlifue-Smith et. al., 2021; Naomi et. al., 2020).

Theme 8. Lack of accessibility

The lack of accessibility is one of the arising concerns in the education sector. Students faced a challenge as a result of modern technology's significant influence on the new normal of education. Most modified strategies and access to learning were not commendable for everyone due to recurring obstacles such as limitations in assistive devices and technologies for students with disabilities that were used as support in their learning and development. Technology issues were emphasized in the situation where it serves as the main tool in the revised curriculum. However, not all students have access to technology, gadgets, or devices to support their educational needs, nor were they knowledgeable about the use of new technologies, particularly teachers who were unfamiliar with the elements and proper operation of technologies. The data also shows that students faced limitations in educational materials and information. Students find it difficult to obtain information or ask questions of professors or other students. In addition, lessons were not recorded, which made it harder for students to review or check the lessons. Also, there were interruptions like having slow internet connectivity or unannounced electric power disruptions (Brownell, et al., 2021). There were educators who gave inadequate materials and inconsideration to the situations of exceptional students, which were not suitable for the learner and made them unable to participate in class nor engage themselves in learning (Brownell et. al., 2020; Dickinson et. al., 2020).

Meta-theme 1: Societal Barriers that Influenced External and Internal aspects of Students with Additional Needs

Society is integral and has an important role in the learning domain of children. It affects the development and growing aspects of individuals, as well as it poses a threat to them in that there were existing barriers that could influence both internal and external aspects of children, prior to those individuals with additional needs.

Meta-theme 2: Educational Resources and Support affecting Students with Exceptionalities

Educational institutions and other related services that support students' learning development gave interventions that can be utilized by students with additional needs. However, there were advantages and disadvantages to the implementation of new normal education, like cash assistance that was not successfully claimed by students whose mobility was limited by their disabilities. Apart from this, SPED services also act as one of the support systems for Students with Special Needs. These services ensure that the unique needs of these students were successfully catered to and attained. If these services were disrupted, the continuation of learning might also be negatively affected.

IV.   Conclusion and Recommendation

The global COVID-19 PANDEMIC challenged every individual to a sudden transition, specifically in the aspect of the education of students with additional needs. Thus, this created various experiences, such as difficulty in the adjustments to the major changes in educational platforms. In educational institutions, societal barriers and educational resources were important factors. They had an impact on the learning of students with disabilities. As a result, the researchers recommended for the government, it is suggested to provide assistance and supports that is accessible to individuals with disabilities, prior to those who have difficulty in terms of mobility; for stakeholders, the school-teacher-family-student cooperation must be strengthened as one of the important factors in the success of inclusive education; for the licensed teachers, they have to undergo annual training for enhancing professionalism in the field of education and in knowing the possible intervention in supporting the student; and, for students with additional needs, it is encouraged for them to undergo daily mental check and status update to ensure their welfare and well-being.

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