

Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges: A Qualitative Exploration of Multi-Disciplinary Collaboration in Supporting Special Education Learners

Hedalene C. Apuntar

University of Perpetual Help System-DALTA - Las Piñas

preciouslene08@gmail.com

Article Details:

Received: 17 March 2026

Revised: 21 March 2026

Accepted: 25 March 2026

Published: 30 March 2026

Corresponding Email:

preciouslene08@gmail.com

Recommended Citation:

Apuntar, H. C. (2026). Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges: A Qualitative Exploration of Multi-Disciplinary Collaboration in Supporting Special Education Learners. *The International Review of Multidisciplinary Research*, 1 (3), 575-582. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19337377>

Index Terms:

multidisciplinary collaboration, inclusive education, special education learners, Individualized Education Program, allied health professionals, private schools, SPED teachers, qualitative research

Abstract. Inclusive education increasingly requires strong collaboration among educators, administrators, and allied health professionals to effectively support learners with special educational needs. Despite the growing emphasis on multidisciplinary teamwork, limited research has examined how such collaboration occurs within private school settings in the Philippines, particularly when schools partner with hospital-based therapy providers. This study explored the lived experiences of professionals engaged in multidisciplinary collaboration to support Special Education (SPED) learners in private schools in Laguna. A qualitative narrative research design was employed to capture the experiences of ten purposively selected participants, including occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, SPED teachers, and school administrators. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic narrative analysis to identify recurring patterns related to communication, decision-making, professional roles, and Individualized Education Program (IEP) development and implementation. Findings revealed that effective collaboration strengthened learner support through shared expertise, coordinated planning, and consistent communication among professionals. Participants emphasized that multidisciplinary teamwork improved the alignment of therapeutic and educational goals, resulting in more responsive and individualized interventions. However, challenges such as role ambiguity, limited time for coordination, and logistical barriers between schools and external therapy providers occasionally hindered collaborative processes. The study concludes that structured communication systems, clearly defined professional roles, and strong administrative support are essential in sustaining effective multidisciplinary partnerships. Enhancing these collaborative practices can significantly improve inclusive education and promote holistic developmental outcomes for SPED learners in private school contexts.

Introduction

Inclusive education has become an essential component of modern educational systems as schools strive to address the diverse needs of learners. Within special education (SPED), collaboration among teachers, administrators, and allied health professionals is crucial in ensuring that learners with disabilities receive comprehensive academic and developmental support. Multidisciplinary collaboration enables professionals with diverse expertise to work together to design and implement interventions that address learners' educational, physical, and communication needs.

Previous research highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in inclusive education. Studies have demonstrated that collaborative partnerships among educators and therapists improve the effectiveness of individualized education programs (IEPs) and promote inclusive classroom practices. Occupational therapists, physical therapists, and

speech-language pathologists contribute specialized knowledge that complements classroom instruction, thereby enhancing learner engagement and participation.

Existing literature also emphasizes the role of school leadership in facilitating collaboration. Administrators who provide organizational support, allocate resources, and encourage professional dialogue create environments where collaborative practices can flourish. Through coordinated teamwork, professionals can align their expertise and develop more comprehensive support systems for learners with special educational needs.

Despite the recognized benefits of collaboration, several challenges remain. Previous studies identify barriers such as limited communication structures, role ambiguity among professionals, insufficient time for coordination, and logistical challenges when services are provided outside the school setting. These issues often result in fragmented support systems that limit the effectiveness of collaborative interventions.

Furthermore, while international studies extensively discuss interdisciplinary collaboration in inclusive education, limited research has explored this phenomenon in the Philippine context. In particular, little is known about collaborative practices between private schools and hospital-based therapy providers who support learners with disabilities.

Given this gap in the literature, the present study aims to explore the lived experiences of professionals involved in multidisciplinary collaboration supporting SPED learners in private schools. Understanding these experiences may provide valuable insights into the factors that facilitate or hinder effective collaboration.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do professionals describe their lived experiences in multidisciplinary collaboration when supporting SPED learners?
2. What themes emerge from their collaborative experiences?
3. What insights can be drawn to improve collaborative practices in inclusive education?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative research design to examine the experiences of professionals engaged in multidisciplinary collaboration. Narrative research was selected because it allows participants to share personal stories and reflections, providing deeper insights into how collaboration occurs in real-world contexts.

The narrative approach enabled the researcher to analyze shared experiences and identify patterns related to collaboration among educators, therapists, and administrators.

Participants

The study involved ten participants who were purposively selected based on their professional roles in supporting SPED learners. Participants included:

Two occupational therapists
Two physical therapists
Two speech-language pathologists
Two special education teachers
Two school administrators

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience in multidisciplinary collaboration.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were required to:

- Work in a private school or hospital-based therapy center
- Have at least two years of professional experience
- Be actively involved in supporting SPED learners

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was ensured by assigning pseudonyms to participants and removing identifying information from transcripts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that explored participants' experiences in multidisciplinary collaboration.

The interview guide focused on the following topics:

- Professional roles in supporting SPED learners
- Experiences in collaborative planning and intervention
- Communication practices among professionals
- Challenges encountered in collaboration

Interviews were conducted either in person or through online platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic narrative analysis.

The analysis process included:

- Reading and familiarizing with the transcripts
- Identifying meaningful statements related to collaboration
- Coding recurring ideas and experiences
- Grouping codes into themes and categories
- Interpreting themes in relation to the research questions

This process allowed the researcher to identify patterns across participants' experiences while maintaining the context of their narratives.

Results and Discussion

The narrative analysis of interview data revealed several recurring patterns in the lived experiences of SPED teachers, therapists, and school administrators involved in multidisciplinary collaboration. Through thematic narrative analysis, **six major themes** emerged that illustrate how collaborative practices are enacted in supporting learners with special educational needs. These themes highlight the relational, contextual, and systemic aspects of teamwork among professionals working across school and therapy environments.

Theme 1: Contextual Responsiveness

Contextual responsiveness emerged as a key theme in the participants' narratives. Professionals emphasized the importance of adapting strategies to learners' emotional readiness, classroom dynamics, and environmental demands. Rather than strictly following predetermined therapy plans, participants described collaboration as a flexible process that requires continuous adjustment based on real classroom situations.

One occupational therapist explained how therapy goals were aligned with academic objectives:

"Kung reading ang goal ng school, sinabayan namin ito ng activities for visual motor skills and sitting behavior."

(If the school's goal is reading, we complement it with activities for visual-motor skills and sitting behavior.)

This statement illustrates how therapists adjust their interventions to complement classroom goals. Such alignment ensures that therapeutic strategies support academic learning rather than operating independently.

Similarly, participants highlighted the importance of addressing learners' emotional needs before academic instruction. As one SPED teacher shared:

"Hindi kasi enough na alam natin ang diagnosis, kailangan alam din natin kung ano ang nararamdaman nila. Ginagawa ko pong makipag-bond sa bata muna bago magturo."

(It is not enough to know the diagnosis; we must also understand how they feel. I make sure to bond with the child first before teaching.)

These findings reinforce sociocultural perspectives on learning, which emphasize the role of social interaction and emotional engagement in educational development. Effective collaboration enables professionals to design interventions that are responsive to learners' emotional and contextual realities.

Theme 2: Systematic Documentation and Contextual Observation

Another important theme that emerged from the analysis was the role of systematic documentation and shared observations in sustaining collaboration. Participants reported that progress reports, therapy notes, and assessment records served as critical tools for communication and decision-making among team members.

Documentation allowed professionals from different disciplines to monitor learner progress and align intervention strategies. Shared records also provided a common reference point during case conferences and team discussions, enabling professionals to make informed decisions collectively.

Participants emphasized that documentation promotes accountability and transparency in collaborative work. When teachers and therapists maintain consistent records, they are better able to track changes in learner performance and adjust interventions accordingly. This practice strengthens continuity of Support across the classroom, therapy, and home environments.

Theme 3: Voice Access and Inclusive Participation

Voice access emerged as another key theme in the narratives. Participants highlighted the importance of involving both parents and learners in collaborative decision-making processes. Providing families with opportunities to share insights into the child's experiences at home helps professionals design more effective and relevant interventions.

Participants noted that parents often provide valuable contextual information about the learner's behavior, emotional responses, and daily routines. These insights help professionals understand learners beyond clinical diagnoses and academic performance.

The inclusion of learners' voices was also emphasized as a critical element of collaboration. When learners are encouraged to express their needs and preferences, they become active participants in their own educational journey. Such practices align with learner-centered approaches in inclusive education.

Theme 4: Needs-Based Assessment

Participants also emphasized that effective collaboration begins with a holistic understanding of the learner. Needs-based assessment involves examining the child's strengths, developmental capacities, emotional readiness, and functional skills rather than focusing solely on diagnostic labels.

Professionals described collaborative assessment as an ongoing process that integrates observations from multiple perspectives. Teachers observe learner behavior within classroom environments, while therapists contribute insights from clinical sessions. By combining these perspectives, teams can develop more comprehensive and individualized intervention plans.

This theme highlights the importance of interdisciplinary expertise in addressing complex learner needs. When professionals share observations and assessments, they create a more complete understanding of the learner's developmental profile.

Theme 5: Collaborative Alignment

Collaborative alignment refers to the process of coordinating professional roles, intervention strategies, and shared goals among team members. Participants emphasized that collaboration becomes effective when professionals clearly understand their respective responsibilities and work toward common objectives.

One SPED teacher explained how communication helps reconcile differences between classroom and clinical observations:

"Minsan may have differences sa observations between the school team at ng outside therapists. Sa clinical setting kasi, controlled yung environment, pero sa classroom mas dynamic. Para ma-address, open communication talaga."

(Sometimes there are differences between the school team's observations and those of outside therapists. In a clinical setting, the environment is controlled, but in the classroom, it is more dynamic. To address this, we rely on open communication.)

This statement highlights the importance of dialogue in resolving differences between professionals working in different contexts. Through open communication and shared understanding, teams can align therapeutic and academic strategies. The importance of collaborative alignment is also reflected in improvements in learner engagement and participation. As one speech-language pathologist noted:

"After using her techniques during our sessions, like deep pressure or weighted tools, the learner became more present, focused, and engaged."

This example demonstrates how coordinated interventions across disciplines can enhance learner outcomes.

Theme 6: Professional Commitment Sustained by Learner Progress

The final theme identified in the narratives was the role of learner progress in sustaining professional commitment. Participants expressed that witnessing improvements in learners—whether academic, behavioral, or social—motivated them to continue investing in collaborative practices. Professionals described collaboration as both emotionally demanding and rewarding. Despite challenges such as scheduling conflicts and heavy workloads, they remained committed to teamwork because of the positive changes they observed in learners' development.

Participants emphasized that even small improvements, such as increased classroom participation or improved communication skills, reinforced the value of collaboration. These shared successes strengthened professional relationships and encouraged continued teamwork.

Integrated Discussion

Overall, the findings reveal that multidisciplinary collaboration is both systematic and relational. While structured processes such as documentation, case conferences, and coordinated planning Support collaboration, interpersonal factors such as trust, empathy, and shared commitment are equally important.

Theme	Description	Representative Participant Quote
<i>Contextual Responsiveness</i>	Professionals adapt interventions and teaching strategies according to the learner's emotional readiness, classroom environment, and academic needs. Collaboration allows therapists and teachers to align therapy activities with school goals.	"Kung reading ang goal ng school, sinabayan namin ito ng activities for visual motor skills and sitting behavior." (Occupational Therapist)
<i>Systematic Documentation and Contextual Observation</i>	Collaborative teams rely on shared records, progress notes, and observations to monitor learner development and guide decision-making. Documentation supports continuity of support between school and therapy environments.	"We regularly share progress notes and observations so that everyone involved in the learner's program understands what strategies are working." (SPED Teacher)
<i>Voice Access and Inclusive Participation</i>	Parents and learners are actively included in discussions and planning processes. Their insights help professionals better understand the learner's needs and experiences across different environments.	"Parents give us important information about the child's behavior at home, and this helps us adjust our strategies in school." (School Administrator)
<i>Needs-Based Assessment</i>	Assessment focuses on the learner's strengths, abilities, and developmental needs rather than relying solely on diagnostic labels. Professionals from different disciplines contribute observations to create a holistic learner profile.	"We assess the child not just based on diagnosis, but on what the learner can already do and what support is needed." (Speech-Language Pathologist)
<i>Collaborative Alignment</i>	Professionals coordinate their goals, roles, and strategies through communication and shared planning. Open discussions help reconcile differences between classroom and clinical observations.	"Minsan may differences sa observations between the school team at ng outside therapists... para ma-address, open communication talaga." (SPED Teacher)
<i>Professional Commitment Sustained by Learner Progress</i>	Observing improvements in learners' behavior, communication, and academic engagement motivates professionals to sustain collaborative efforts despite challenges.	"After using the recommended strategies, the learner became more focused and engaged during class." (Speech-Language Pathologist)

Table 1. Summary of Emergent Themes from Multidisciplinary Collaboration Experiences

The themes identified in this study align with the existing literature, which emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary teamwork in inclusive education. Effective collaboration allows professionals to integrate therapeutic and educational interventions, resulting in more holistic Support systems for learners with special needs.

However, the findings also highlight context-specific challenges faced by professionals working in private schools that partner with external therapy providers. Differences between classroom and clinical environments, time constraints, and logistical barriers can complicate collaborative efforts.

Despite these challenges, participants consistently emphasized that collaboration enhances learner outcomes by ensuring consistent Support across settings. When professionals share expertise, align goals, and communicate effectively, they create a unified system of care that promotes both academic success and holistic development.

Conclusion and Implications

This study examined the lived experiences of professionals engaged in multidisciplinary collaboration in supporting Special Education (SPED) learners in private schools. The findings revealed that collaboration among SPED teachers, school administrators, and allied health professionals is crucial to providing inclusive, coordinated Support for learners with special needs. Participants emphasized that effective communication, shared professional responsibility, and coordinated planning contributed significantly to the successful implementation of individualized interventions. These findings directly address the research questions by demonstrating how collaborative practices shape professional experiences and by identifying key themes that characterize effective multidisciplinary teamwork.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to existing literature on inclusive education and interdisciplinary collaboration by highlighting how collaborative practices operate within private school contexts in the Philippines. The findings support theoretical views such as sociocultural and ecological frameworks, which emphasize the importance of interaction among professionals and systems in supporting learner development. By documenting real-world collaborative experiences, this research extends current knowledge on how multidisciplinary teams integrate therapeutic and educational expertise to Support learners with diverse needs.

The study also offers practical implications for educational stakeholders. Schools should establish coordinated communication systems that enable regular interaction among teachers, therapists, and administrators. Professional development programs focused on interdisciplinary collaboration may help clarify professional roles and strengthen teamwork among service providers. School leaders also play an essential role in fostering collaborative cultures by allocating time for team meetings, supporting coordinated planning, and facilitating partnerships with therapy providers. Strengthening these systems can improve the implementation of inclusive education and enhance the quality of Support services provided to SPED learners.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small and limited to participants working in private school settings and hospital-based therapy providers. As a result, the findings may not fully represent collaborative experiences in public schools or other educational contexts. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which participants' perceptions and experiences may influence.

These limitations provide opportunities for future research. Subsequent studies may expand the sample size and include participants from different regions and educational settings to enhance generalizability. Quantitative studies also examine the relationship between multidisciplinary collaboration and measurable learner outcomes. Future researchers may test hypotheses such as whether structured collaborative meetings significantly improve the effectiveness of individualized education programs or whether increased communication among professionals leads to improved academic and developmental outcomes for SPED learners. Exploring these areas further strengthens evidence-based practices that Support inclusive education.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the colleagues and institutions who provided guidance, feedback, and support throughout the conduct of this research and the preparation of this manuscript. Any remaining errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Funding

This research received no external funding from any public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agency, and no organization provided financial support for the conduct of the study, authorship, or publication of this article.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

References

- Adams, D., Moosa, V., Shareefa, M., Mohamed, A., & Tan, K. L. (2024). Assessing inclusive school leadership practices in Malaysia: Instrument adaptation and validation. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 72(3), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2024.2354895>
- Akçin, F. N. (2022). Identification of the processes of preparing individualized education programs (IEP) by special education teachers and problems encountered therein. ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1332835>
- Aldosiry, N. (2022). The influence of support from administrators and other work conditions on special education teachers. *Insights into Learning Disabilities*, 19(1), 1–19. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1368891>
- Alhossyan, F. (2022). Collaboration between special and general education teachers: A systematic review. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 13(4), 56–72.
- Allam, F. C., & Martin, M. M. (2021). Issues and challenges in special education: A qualitative analysis from teachers' perspective. ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1296259>
- Alnahdi, G. H., & Alharthi, A. S. (2023). The impact of teacher collaboration on inclusive education: Exchange, synchronization, and co-construction. *Cogent Education*, 10(1), Article 2240941. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2240941>
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In R. M. Lerner (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 793–828). John Wiley & Sons.
- Brossman, H. L., Chiarello, L. A., Palisano, R. J., & Wynarczyk, K. D. (2023). A collaborative approach to support participation in physical recreation for preschool students with multiple disabilities: A case series. *Children*, 3(4), Article 38. <https://www.mdpi.com/2673-7272/3/4/38>
- Ciocon, L. A. (2023). Professional characteristics and instructional leadership of school heads: Their relationship to the implementation of special education (SPED) program. *AIDE Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 3(1), 338–360. <https://doi.org/10.56648/aide-irj.v3i1.73>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2023). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Curro, K., Shooman, L., & Foo, S. (2022). The use of interprofessional education (IPE) to address collaboration for individualized education plans (IEPs): A retrospective study. ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1349682>
- Dela Cruz, J. P., & Rosales, M. T. (2023). Contextual challenges and adaptive practices in Philippine inclusive classrooms. *Philippine Social Science Journal*, 6(2), 78–89.
- Devi, P. (2023). Differentiated instruction in special education: Enhancing academic, social, and emotional outcomes. *Global Institute for Research and Technology Journal*, 2(2), 45–54.
- Dillon, A., Armstrong, A., & Scurry, D. (2021). Improving special education service delivery through interdisciplinary collaboration. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 53(6), 442–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599211029671>
- Dizon, R. C., Calma, R. B., & Salvador, M. A. (2021). Inclusive education in the Philippines: Educators' perspectives and challenges. *Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 9(3), 45–53.
- Fasting, R. B., & Breilid, N. (2023). Cross-professional collaboration to improve inclusive education. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2023.2175248>
- Friend, M., & Cook, L. (2020). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals* (9th ed.). Pearson.
- Jeremy, J., Spandagou, I., & Hinitt, J. (2024). Teacher-therapist collaboration in inclusive primary schools: A scoping review. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 71(2), 215–231. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12931>
- Koutsoklenis, A., & Papadimitriou, V. (2021). Special education provision in Greek mainstream classrooms. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 25(11), 1281–1296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1942565>

Lee, H., Park, S., & Kim, J. (2024). Effects of school-based occupational therapy program for children with disabilities in Korea: A case study. *BMC Psychology*, 12, Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-01520-3>

Appendices

No appendices are included in this article