

**Evaluating the effectiveness of early intervention programs on supporting students with
Special Educational needs (LSENs) development**

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Evaluating the effectiveness of early intervention programs on supporting students with Special Educational needs (LSENs) development by Elvira Impas Ycot, Marivic Telebrico Talandron, Girlie S. Suello, Wendelyn A. Sasan, Janine Joy L. Tenerife-Cañete, Lilibeth C. Pinili, Honorio C. Añora, and Majorie B. Añero

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of early intervention programs in enhancing the developmental outcomes of learners with special educational needs (LSENs) at Zapatera School SpEd Center in Cebu City during the 2024-2025 school year. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the study involved 15 participants, 10 special education teachers, and five parents selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through open-ended interviews and focus group discussions and then analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that early intervention programs significantly improved LSENs' communication skills, social interaction, academic performance, and behavioral development. Key elements contributing to success included individualized instruction, structured routines, and play-based learning. However, significant challenges such as resource limitations, time constraints, and large class sizes hindered program effectiveness. Teachers responded by maximizing available resources, adjusting instructional strategies, and fostering parental engagement. Emotional support from families and institutional backing were crucial in sustaining success. The study concluded that while early intervention programs positively impact LSENs, their effectiveness relies on consistent parental involvement, adequate resources, and strong institutional support. Addressing logistical barriers such as funding shortages and high student-teacher ratios is essential for optimizing outcomes. Recommendations include securing sustainable funding, fostering collaboration between families and communities, enhancing teacher training, and reducing class sizes to improve personalized learning. By addressing these challenges, early intervention programs can more effectively support LSENs' developmental needs, ensuring long-term educational and social benefits. These findings emphasize the need for a holistic approach to early intervention, integrating resources, training, and stakeholder collaboration for sustained impact.

Keywords: Early intervention programs, Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSENs), individualized instruction, Special Education, resource limitations, support, thematic analysis, Cebu City, Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

Early intervention programs are designed to provide support and resources to children with special educational needs (SEN) as early as possible to improve their developmental outcomes. These programs are based on the understanding that early childhood is crucial for cognitive, social, and emotional growth. Addressing developmental delays or disabilities at a young age can significantly enhance long-term outcomes for these children. However, the effectiveness of these programs largely depends on the experiences and perceptions of the teachers who implement them. Understanding how special education teachers perceive and experience early intervention is essential in identifying best practices, challenges, and areas for improvement. Therefore, this study explores the experiences and perceptions of teachers regarding early intervention programs for learners with special educational needs (LSENs) at a public-school SpEd Center in Cebu City. By examining their insights, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how these programs are implemented, the challenges faced, and the strategies used to support LSENs effectively. This exploration is crucial in informing policy recommendations and improving early intervention initiatives to ensure better developmental outcomes for children with special needs.

On a global scale, numerous studies have highlighted the importance and effectiveness of early intervention programs. For instance, a survey conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020 emphasized that early intervention can lead to substantial improvements in a child's development, reducing the need for more intensive and costly interventions later in life (WHO, 2020). This study found that children who received early intervention services showed marked improvements in language, cognitive, and social skills compared to those who did not. In the United States, early intervention programs such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C have been pivotal. According to the U.S. Department of Education report in 2019, children who participated in IDEA Part C services demonstrated significant developmental gains. The report indicated that early intervention services are associated with improved outcomes in communication, motor skills, and adaptive behavior (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Locally, various regions have implemented early intervention programs with promising results. A study conducted in California by the California Department of Developmental Services in 2021 found that early intervention services led to improved developmental outcomes for children with special needs. The study reported that children who received early intervention were more likely to achieve age-appropriate developmental milestones and were less likely to require special education services in school (California Department of Developmental Services, 2021).

Despite the positive outcomes associated with early intervention, there are several gaps in the current research. One significant gap is the variability in the quality and availability of early intervention services across different regions. While some areas have well-established programs, others may need more resources and trained personnel to provide adequate services. Additionally, there needs to be more research on the long-term impacts of early intervention, particularly beyond early childhood. Most studies focus on short-term outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding how early intervention affects individuals into adolescence and adulthood. Another gap is the need for more comprehensive data on the effectiveness of early intervention for diverse populations, including children from various socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic groups. Current research often needs to account for the unique challenges and barriers these groups face, which can influence the effectiveness of early intervention programs.

The significance of studying the effectiveness of early intervention programs on developmental outcomes for children with special educational needs must be considered. Understanding the impact of these programs is crucial for several reasons. First, it can inform policy decisions and funding allocations, ensuring that resources are directed toward programs that significantly impact children's development. Second, it can guide the development and implementation of more effective intervention strategies tailored to meet the needs of diverse populations. Furthermore, demonstrating the long-term benefits of early intervention can help advocate for expanding these services, potentially reducing the burden on educational and healthcare systems by preventing the escalation of developmental issues. Finally, this study can contribute to a broader understanding of child development and the importance of early experiences, reinforcing the critical need for early support for children with special educational needs.

Statement of the problem

This study evaluates the effectiveness of early intervention programs in supporting the development of students with special educational needs (LSENs) at Zapatera Elementary School - SpEd Center during the school year 2024-2025 as a basis for proposing an enhanced early intervention program plan. Specifically, this study sought answers to the following sub-problems:

1. How do teachers perceive the impact of early intervention programs on the developmental outcomes of learners with special educational needs (LSENs)?
2. What specific elements of early intervention programs do teachers believe contribute most significantly to positive developmental outcomes for LSENs?
3. What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing early intervention programs that might affect their effectiveness?
4. What strategies or solutions can teachers suggest in overcoming the challenges associated with implementing early intervention programs?
5. Based on the findings of the study, what enhanced early intervention program plan in support of the developmental outcomes of LSENs can be crafted?

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research design, which delves into how individuals experience a phenomenon. This approach aims to reveal and understand the core of participants' experiences, emphasizing their perspectives and subjective meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how learners experiencing special educational needs (LSEN) and teachers and other stakeholders perceive and experience early intervention programs, including their benefits and challenges.

Phenomenology, founded by Edmund Husserl, highlights the necessity of describing phenomena in the manner they appear without being distorted by preconceived ideas or theoretical postulates (Husserl, 1970). This approach involves bracketing or putting aside the biases of the researcher in order to immerse into the narratives of participants fully. Following this framework, we used interviews and focus group discussions to use participants' voices better to understand some of the complexities of early intervention programs.

Phenomenological research has been one of the more commonly supported approaches cited by numerous scholars such as echo van Manen (1990) for the promise it offers to illuminate rich, contextual understandings of human experiences. One such methodology, phenomenology, is consistent with the aim of this study, which is to shed light on the genuine, subjective experiences of LSENs and educators as they progress through early intervention programs.

Respondents and Locale of the Study

In selecting participants for a study assessing the impact of early intervention programs on students with special educational needs (LSENs), researcher face challenging decisions that directly impact the study's outcomes and implications. The choice of respondents, typically special education teachers, is fundamental to understanding how interventions influence developmental outcomes across various domains. Considering these factors, the researcher included diverse participants to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives.

This study analyzed the data using descriptive statistical tools and thematic analysis. Descriptive statistics, guided by a statistician, included frequency counts, percentages, weighted mean, and standard deviation to assess demographic profiles and accessibility levels of early intervention programs for LSENs. Inferential tools such as chi-square tests and correlation analysis explored relationships between variables, such as teachers' perceptions of challenges and the effectiveness of intervention strategies.

In the pre-gathering stage, the researcher first sought approval from the superintendent. After acquiring the superintendent's approval, the researcher asked the school head for permission to conduct the research. Once permission was granted, an initial orientation session was conducted with administrators and teachers.

With approval and informed consent secured, the data-gathering phase commenced. The researcher administered a survey questionnaire to collect the necessary data from respondents. This process was conducted with strict adherence to ethical considerations, ensuring an environment conducive to open communication and respect for individual privacy rights. Following data collection, the researcher consolidated the gathered information. This involved clustering, coding, and tabulating the data in preparation for thorough analysis and interpretation. Throughout this stage, stringent measures were implemented to maintain the confidentiality and security of all study findings, safeguarding respondent anonymity and upholding the ethical responsibility of handling empirical data with integrity and respect.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the findings of the study based on the data gathered from the participating teachers involved in the implementation of early intervention programs for learners with special educational needs (LSENs). Guided by a qualitative research design, the study employed purposive sampling to select participants who had direct experience delivering early intervention services in school settings. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share in-depth perspectives on developmental outcomes, effective program elements, challenges encountered, and proposed solutions. The analysis followed a thematic approach, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and meanings across participant responses. The discussion that follows is grounded strictly in the collected data and is organized in relation to the study objectives, with findings interpreted in light of existing literature and contextual realities.

Contextual characteristics and perspective of participants

The participants were teachers directly involved in early intervention programs for LSENs, primarily within special education or inclusive classroom settings. Their professional roles positioned them as key observers of learners' developmental progress across communication, social, academic, emotional, and behavioral domains. Because of their sustained interaction with LSENs and close collaboration with parents and other professionals, the participants were able to provide informed and reflective accounts of program outcomes and implementation realities. This contextual background is essential for interpreting the findings, as teachers' perceptions are shaped by daily instructional practices, institutional constraints, and ongoing engagement with learners and families.

Teachers' perceptions of the impact of early intervention programs on developmental outcomes

Teachers consistently perceived early intervention programs as having a substantial positive impact on the developmental outcomes of LSENs, particularly in communication, social interaction, and academic functioning. Participants emphasized that early and targeted support enabled learners to overcome barriers that previously limited participation and engagement. One respondent noted that "non-speaking students have successfully used alternative communication tools, such as picture exchange systems or assistive technology, to interact with teachers and peers" (R1). This observation highlights how augmentative and alternative communication strategies reduce frustration and promote inclusion, allowing learners to participate meaningfully in classroom interactions.

Social development was likewise identified as a key area of improvement. Teachers reported that structured peer play activities supported the development of cooperative behaviors, as illustrated by the observation that "early intervention programs with peer play activities have helped LSENs learn to take turns during games and group activities, fostering cooperative play" (R3). These experiences are critical for social integration, as they allow learners to practice social norms in supportive and predictable contexts. Academic development was also positively influenced through individualized instruction. One participant explained that "Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) with scaffolded learning goals have guided students to complete academic tasks independently and with greater confidence" (R5). This finding underscores the importance of personalized and developmentally appropriate goals in fostering autonomy and self-efficacy among LSENs.

These results affirm the central role of individualized and targeted strategies in early intervention programs. The findings align with Jung and Sainato (2021), who reported that the use of alternative communication methods significantly improves communicative competence and reduces behavioral difficulties among children with autism spectrum disorder. Similarly, Carter et al. (2022) found that structured peer-mediated interventions enhance social engagement and cooperative behaviors, while Hodge et al. (2023) emphasized that well-implemented IEPs lead to measurable academic progress and increased learner confidence. Parental engagement emerged as a reinforcing factor, with teachers noting that collaboration among educators, parents, and caregivers amplifies the effectiveness of early interventions. This observation supports Smith and

Patel (2020), who highlighted that active parental involvement accelerates developmental gains and strengthens program outcomes.

Observed changes and remaining challenges among LSENs

Teachers observed notable improvements among many LSENs participating in early intervention programs, particularly in academic independence and task completion. One respondent stated that learners “can complete simple academic tasks with less prompting, demonstrating increased independence” (R3). This improvement reflects the effectiveness of scaffolded instruction and consistent support. However, the findings also reveal that progress is not uniform across all learners. Some teachers reported persistent challenges, including behavioral difficulties and ongoing communication delays. One participant noted that “there are a small number of students who are still aggressive or injure themselves, and most have done so in unstructured settings” (R6), while another emphasized that “communication and social skills are a work in progress for some students” (R9).

These mixed outcomes suggest that while early intervention programs are broadly effective, their impact is moderated by factors such as the severity of learners’ needs, the consistency of intervention delivery, and the degree of collaboration among stakeholders. The persistence of behavioral challenges in unstructured environments indicates a need for interventions that generalize beyond the classroom. These findings are consistent with Jung and Sainato (2021), who observed that behavioral difficulties may persist outside structured settings, and Carter et al. (2022), who emphasized that communication and social development often require prolonged and consistent reinforcement. The results further highlight the importance of continuous monitoring and adaptation of intervention strategies to address learners’ evolving needs.

Effective elements of early intervention programs amid resource constraints

Teachers identified several program elements as particularly effective in supporting LSENs’ development, even within resource-constrained contexts. Individualized instruction was consistently prioritized, with one participant stating, “We always prioritize creating individualized education plans tailored to each child’s needs” (R4). Play-based and hands-on activities were also valued for their ability to engage learners meaningfully, as reflected in the observation that “we engage students in play-based and hands-on activities because it allows them to learn while enjoying” (R9). These strategies support cognitive, social, and emotional development in a low-pressure environment.

Despite these strengths, teachers reported significant challenges related to limited resources. One respondent explained that “we often face a shortage of teaching materials, assistive technology, and other resources necessary to fully implement individualized or multisensory strategies” (R7). The absence of adequate materials and tools constrained teachers’ ability to fully address diverse learner needs. Nevertheless, teachers demonstrated adaptability by modifying existing resources and relying on creativity to sustain instruction. These findings align with Lee and Park (2020), who reported that assistive technology enhances language and academic outcomes, and Rojas et al. (2022), who found that play-based interventions improve social and motor skills. Hunt and Ko (2021) further emphasized the importance of interprofessional collaboration in maximizing program effectiveness, particularly in resource-limited settings.

Parental perceptions and emotional dimensions of early intervention

Teachers reported that parents and caregivers generally perceived early intervention programs positively, particularly in relation to communication and behavioral regulation. One respondent shared that “parents often tell me that their children can now express themselves better, even with simple words or gestures. They feel more connected to their children, which is encouraging” (R6). Another noted that “many parents observe fewer tantrums and meltdowns at home. They say the routines and strategies we use in school have helped their children regulate their behavior better” (R9). These observations indicate that school-based interventions have meaningful spillover effects in home environments.

However, parental perceptions were not uniformly positive. Some parents expressed frustration regarding the pace of progress, as captured in the statement that “some parents express frustration that progress is slow. They compare their child’s development to others and feel worried, even though we remind them that each child develops at their own pace” (R8). This tension highlights the emotional complexity surrounding early intervention and underscores the need for clear communication and expectation-setting. These findings are supported by Hassan and Omar (2021), who reported that improved communication reduces parental stress, and Gonzalez and Cruz (2020), who noted that unmet expectations may lead to parental frustration. The results emphasize the importance of parent education and transparent progress monitoring to sustain trust and engagement.

Instructional strategies supporting LSEN development

Structured routines and individualized attention emerged as essential strategies for supporting LSENs’ development. Teachers emphasized that predictability enhances learners’ sense of security and focus, with one respondent stating, “structured routines are key for many of my students. They feel more secure and focused when they know what to expect” (R8). Another added that such routines “help them transition smoothly between activities, which is crucial for children with developmental delays” (R10). At the same time, teachers acknowledged that large class sizes hinder their ability to provide individualized support. One participant explained that “when there are too many students in the class, it is hard to provide the individual attention that children with special needs require” (R3).

These findings indicate that effective early intervention depends on a balance between structured environments and personalized instruction. Research by Garcia et al. (2021) supports this conclusion, emphasizing that smaller class sizes facilitate individualized attention, while Hernandez and Ramos (2022) demonstrated that structured routines enhance emotional regulation and engagement among learners with developmental delays.

Challenges in implementing early intervention programs

Teachers identified several systemic challenges that affect the effectiveness of early intervention programs, including resource limitations, time constraints, and large class sizes. Funding shortages were frequently cited, with one respondent stating, “the biggest challenge we face is the lack of funding” (R2). Teachers described compensatory strategies such as using local

materials and modifying existing tools, as reflected in the statements “I use local materials and modify existing tools to create learning experiences” (R4) and “even though we have limited resources, we try to make do with what we have” (R7). While these approaches demonstrate resilience, they also highlight inequities in program implementation.

Time constraints and large class sizes further limited teachers’ capacity to deliver individualized interventions. One participant noted that “time is always a challenge. There is never enough time to provide individualized attention to each student” (R2), while another emphasized that “it is difficult to track each student’s progress effectively with a large class” (R8). Although strategies such as breaking tasks into manageable chunks were employed to maximize instructional time (R6), these measures could not fully compensate for systemic limitations. These findings are consistent with Aguilar et al. (2022) and Santos and Mendoza (2023), who identified overcrowded classrooms and limited instructional time as major barriers to effective early intervention.

Teacher-recommended strategies for overcoming challenges

In response to these challenges, teachers proposed practical strategies centered on creativity, collaboration, and efficient classroom management. Participants described using recycled and locally available materials, collaborating with parents and community members, and repurposing existing resources. One respondent explained, “since our resources are limited, I make use of local materials like recycled items or materials found in nature” (R3), while another highlighted the role of collaboration, stating, “we rely heavily on collaborative efforts. Teachers, parents, and the community often pitch in to provide what is needed for the students” (R6). Peer support strategies were also employed to address time and class size constraints, as described by the practice of pairing more advanced students with those who need assistance (R4).

These strategies align with Paz (2020) and Lopez (2022), who emphasized teacher creativity and community involvement as critical coping mechanisms in resource-limited educational contexts. However, the findings also suggest that such strategies place additional burdens on teachers and may not be sustainable without institutional support. As Gonzales (2023) noted, long-term program success requires systemic investment rather than reliance on individual ingenuity.

Synthesis of experiences and implications for program effectiveness

Teachers’ experiences collectively highlight both the transformative potential and the persistent challenges of early intervention programs for LSENs. Participants emphasized that progress is often gradual but meaningful, with one teacher noting that “it is not always immediate, but the progress in communication, socialization, and academic skills over time is rewarding” (R1). At the same time, inconsistent parental involvement, emotional strain on families, and limited administrative support were identified as factors that constrain program effectiveness. One respondent stressed that “we must get support from the school administration. Without their backing, it is difficult to implement effective early intervention programs” (R3).

These findings reinforce the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach to early intervention, integrating effective teaching strategies, consistent family engagement, emotional support, and strong institutional backing. This conclusion aligns with Jenkins and Smith (2022), who emphasized the role of family and administrative support in sustaining intervention outcomes,

and Davies and Winter (2021), who highlighted the importance of addressing emotional needs alongside academic goals.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that early intervention programs play a critical role in supporting the communication, social, academic, and behavioral development of learners with special educational needs. Teachers perceive these programs as highly beneficial, particularly when individualized instruction, structured routines, and play-based learning are effectively implemented. However, the effectiveness of early intervention is moderated by systemic challenges, including limited resources, time constraints, large class sizes, and inconsistent parental and institutional support. The results address the study objectives by illuminating both the strengths and limitations of current practices and underscore the need for sustained investment, professional development, and collaborative partnerships. These insights provide a foundation for refining early intervention policies and practices and logically prepare the reader for subsequent discussions on conclusions, recommendations, and implications for future research.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, early intervention programs for learners with special educational needs (LSENs) can yield significant positive outcomes, including improvements in communication, socialization, and academic skills. However, the effectiveness of these programs is heavily influenced by several key factors. First, consistent parental involvement is essential for ensuring that interventions have the desired impact. Second, addressing the emotional needs of both students and their families is crucial, as it creates a supportive learning environment that fosters long-term success. Third, the support of the school administration is vital to overcoming resource limitations and implementing effective strategies. Lastly, educators' creativity and adaptability are pivotal in managing time constraints and large class sizes. However, these challenges remain barriers that must be addressed to optimize program effectiveness. To enhance the success and sustainability of early intervention programs, there is a need for stronger collaboration between families, schools, and the community and adequate institutional support and resources.

It is recommended that the enhanced early intervention program plan be adopted to address the identified needs and improve the developmental outcomes for learners with special educational needs (LSENs). This plan should emphasize consistent parental involvement, emotional support for both students and families, and strengthened institutional backing from school administration to ensure resource availability and effective program implementation. By adopting this plan, schools can better support LSENs, foster their growth, and maximize the impact of early intervention programs.

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