

Facing an unexpected challenge: How Special Education Teacher Happy?

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ABSTRACT

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Happiness has a different meaning for special education teachers due to facing the challenges such as aggressive behavior, pressure from special children, and blocking their emotion. Aim to this study to deeply understand how special education teacher happiness. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used in this study by collecting data base on in-depth interview and observations. Participants that involved in this study was special education teacher had worked for more than two years. Data analysis were carried out by condensation data, coding, and synthesis. The results of this study showed that the happiness of special education teachers was divided into main themes, positive relationship with others, positive emotions, optimism, finding meaning, and involvement. Happiness of special education teachers was influenced by spirituality, work experience, and income. Meaning of happiness from special education teachers was defined by how they can control reaction from facing uncertainty challenges and look from different ways.

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BACKGROUND

Special education teacher are responsible as guides, teachers, and facilitators for students with special needs to develop individual resources (Meka et al., 2023; Sukadari, 2020; Widhiati et al., 2022). The presence of children with special needs has different needs to support life, so they need space to develop their potential and abilities through tutoring institutions or special education interventions as an addition to obtaining optimal services in the implementation of education (Almughyiri, 2024; Deniz et al., 2010; Max & McCoy-Dailey, 2024). The existence of limited accommodation in the formal and informal sectors has a negative impact on the development of children with special needs (Pandito & Diva, 2024).

Special education teachers experience a deficit due to scarce availability with various roles in special education, inclusive, to non-formal education (Almalky & Alrabiah, 2024; Almalky & Alwahbi, 2023; Charania & Patel, 2022; Leatherman, 2015; Pandito & Diva, 2024). The serious problems that are often faced are one of the unexpected challenges due to exposure to negative perceptions that children with special needs are often considered small children and need help (Dunn, 2021). Perceptions about disability are important constructs of society's moral compass (Babik & Gardner, 2021). This is confirmed by research findings through a

preliminary study conducted by conducting interviews with special education teachers, namely conflicts with parents who do not like services that perceive prevention or services as violence such as blocking and swaddling techniques to provide calm or train children's focus. Previously, an agreement and explanation had been made regarding the services provided. According to the teacher's statement, they prevent children from hurting themselves so that they are the ones who are injured but the parents sue them for violence.

The teaching experience of special education teachers is diverse, one of which is experiencing difficulties with uncertainty due to conditions that may occur in children with special needs (Deniz et al., 2010; Levy, 2023; Okeke et al., 2021; Walter et al., 2023). Certain behavioral conditions such as aggressive behavior have psychological impacts such as emotional suppression (Levy, 2023). Special education teachers often come into contact with things that have negative emotional effects such as when dealing with students who are aggressive or have behavioral disorders (Levy, 2023; Okeke et al., 2021; Rahmani, 2016). Not infrequently, teachers become victims of aggressive behavior of children with special needs. In responding to this behavior, teachers carry out emotional suppression, diversion or emotional suppression to fake expressions in order to



maintain the gap between the emotions felt and the form of expression shown (Alhwaiti, 2022; Murik et al., 2005; Park et al., 2024). Research that has been conducted found that the main motive of special education teacher is suppressing their emotions to manage aggressive events and their classrooms (Levy, 2023). This suggests that teachers rely on emotional management in doing their jobs so that it does not affect their performance when teaching.

Guidance and services from teachers during the student learning process are influenced by the happiness felt by the teacher (Aziz et al., 2011). Happiness and intelligence in managing emotions have a positive effect on teacher performance (Aswati et al., 2023). Happiness is one of the keys for special education teachers to survive and have good performance while carrying out their profession. Teachers must be able to carry out their duties professionally in accordance with their competence which is a responsibility as a consequence of their profession.

Research has found that teacher happiness has a causal relationship with innovative behavior, work engagement, achievement, and classroom management (Prasetyo et al., 2021). Other studies have shown that teacher happiness correlates with student academic outcomes, with teacher job satisfaction influencing happiness (Aziz et al., 2020). Meanwhile, emotional exhaustion in teachers can impact the efficacy of interventions and reduce student access to practices that support learning and development (Cumming et al., 2021; Lane et al., 2021). Teacher psychological well-being can encourage teachers to enjoy the teaching process, enhance positive student development, and increase commitment to students (Yin et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023; Boldbaatar, 2025;). Therefore, teacher happiness is a key foundation for student academic success and optimal access to academic services.

Teacher happiness is crucial for providing optimal service through emotional intelligence and generating subjective happiness (Mertoglu, 2018; Mérida-López et al., 2022). Therefore, it can be concluded that teacher happiness plays a crucial role in optimal service delivery and can influence performance and collective student development. The studies described involved teachers in regular settings, so they do not specifically describe the happiness of teachers of children with special needs, who have different experiences. The happiness experiences of teachers of children with special needs have not been a popular topic of discussion compared to the happiness of regular teachers.

The word happiness is a general term that describes the overall goal of positive psychology. According to the positive psychology approach, many factors influence a person's level of happiness, including the ability to be grateful, optimism, the ability to love, family harmony, and life satisfaction (Seligman, 2005; Chan, 2013; Toulabi, et al., 2013; Hwang et al., 2015; Mahipalan, 2019). The positive psychology approach has three main ideas related to happiness. First, a positive subjective experience in the form of a level of prosperity, a feeling of being connected, a feeling of joy, a feeling of optimism, and full of hope (Awaludin, 2017). Second, the condition of a person's personality that is

experiencing growth and development, such as courage, perseverance, wisdom, and openness (Seligman, 2011). Third, the role of the environment in supporting positive individual experiences and fostering an adaptive personality (Robbins, 2008).

The theory of happiness (Seligman, 2002) has three dimensions, namely 1) a pleasant life where humans learn to enjoy and appreciate basic pleasures such as friendship, 2) a good life to find virtue and unique strengths that are owned, 3) a meaningful life, humans find a deep sense of satisfaction by using unique strengths for purposes greater than themselves. Happiness is a positive emotion that arises without the influence of negative emotions. Happiness is associated as a positive emotional experience, or an affective state that is not accompanied by negative emotions (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

According to Seligman (2005) the main aspects that can be a source of true happiness are aspects of feelings of joy and satisfaction, aspects of the manifestation of strength and goodness, and aspects of meaning and purpose are described as follows: a) Establishing positive relationships with others, not just having friends, partners, or children, but establishing positive relationships with individuals around. Marital status and having children cannot guarantee a person's happiness. b) Full involvement in daily life, not only in career, but also in other activities such as hobbies and activities with family. By fully involving yourself, not only the physical is active, but the heart and mind also participate in the activity. c) Finding meaning in daily life in full involvement and positive relationships with others implies another way to be happy, namely finding meaning in whatever is done. d) Realistic optimism, optimistic people are found to be happier. They are not easily anxious because they live life with full hope e) Resilience, the ability of individuals to recover from unpleasant events (Seligman, 2011).

The happy experience felt by special education teachers at school comes from positive emotions felt when teachers are felt as happy, cheerful, miss students, touched, acceptance, give sincerity and patience, teachers feel satisfaction by seeing the development of students (Cahyaningrum et al., 2017). Happiness has a different definition for each individual. A study of teacher happiness has been conducted with the aim of understanding in depth the value of happiness by exploring the experiences of teachers in the interior of Papua. The results show that teachers' experiences of serving provide positive feelings when students follow lessons and show high interest in learning (Irianto & Subandi, 2015).

Positive emotions in teachers can foster motivation to maximize services for children with special needs. (Diponegoro et al., 2020). Teachers' emotions are psychic energy that teachers instill in practices that shape their professional identity (Meihami & Rashidi, 2022). Teachers' happiness must be commensurate with the magnitude of the responsibility entrusted to them. The goal of education is to ensure openness and sustainability of appropriate access for all children according to their needs (Almughyiri, 2024). Special teachers are able to turn obstacles into opportunities

to be creative and innovative in providing services to students (Max & McCoy-Dailey, 2024).

Teacher happiness affects teacher performance in implementing the learning process in the classroom. Teacher happiness is the key to the development of the people around them. A prosperous state increases individual productivity, creativity and effective performance. Based on previous research, it is stated that the picture of happiness of teachers of children with special needs is felt through positive thoughts, positive emotions and satisfaction. (Cahyaningtyas et al., 2020). Happiness is shown by the strength of character that can be brought out when carrying out duties as teachers and positive feelings when students are able to follow the lesson (Irianto & Subandi, 2015). Happy teachers are able to teach effectively by balancing students' thinking abilities and adjusting themselves so that students are able to receive knowledge. Happy teachers have a significant relationship with components of work quality (Toulabi et al., 2013). Achieving happiness and meaningfulness in the process of achieving teacher knowledge makes teachers of children with special needs able to carry out their work well.

Based on the explanation above, this study aims to examine and gain an in-depth understanding of the happiness of teachers of children with special needs. Exploration of happiness in special education teachers is carried out to increase understanding of the emotional stability of teachers in maintaining the quality of learning in the education sector so that it runs effectively.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research design

This study use a qualitative approach, using phenomenology method. The data collection technique was carried out by conducting direct interviews and observing the activities of teachers/tutors of children with special needs. The study was carried out by collecting data through interviews and observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals using the snowball sampling technique to increase the number of participants by asking participants who had been interviewed to recommend other potential participants.

Participants

The research informants were six people who had worked at being special education teacher for two years. This study produced several findings related to the theme of happiness of special education teachers.

Data analysis

Data analysis techniques are carried out through the stages of data preparation and managing it, reading all the data that has been obtained through interview transcripts, analyzing in detail by coding the data, carrying out the categorization process, finding themes, and interpreting the data or giving meaning to the data. The validity of the

research data is carried out by member checking, so that the data findings are accurate.

RESEARCH RESULTS

This study consisted of 6 participants, consisting of one man and five female teachers. The respondents presented in table 1. Based on interviews with respondents that have been conducted as many as six people. The researcher describes the results of the study with each main theme that emerged in the data analysis.

Table 1. Respondent characteristics

Initials	Gender	Experience	Education	Age
FY	Female	10 years	Bachelor of Education	28 y.o
MF	Male	4 years	Bachelor of Education	27 y.o
SM	Female	4 years	Bachelor of Education	26 y.o
ASM	Female	4 years	Bachelor of Education	24 y.o
EYW	Female	8 years	Master of Education	29 y.o
NM	Female	6 years	Bachelor of Education	27 y.o

Positive relationships with others.

Positive relationship with co-workers by six respondents stated they have a good relationship. Cooperation, being cooperative, and family were expressed by respondents as expressed by ASM.

“... the relationship is very good, we are united, and help each other, especially if a child is having a tantrum, we will definitely help.”

In carrying out the duties as a teacher of children with special needs, good cooperation with others is needed to handle or provide services for them. The establishment of positive relationships with others does not only occur between fellow teachers, but also parents of children with special needs, regarding this matter, communication is the main key as a teacher of children with special needs. Teacher IM tells about the relationship with parents.

“ Because talking about ABK is not only talking about the child, but the most important thing is cooperative parents and families, often parents give us gifts, food, parcels without being asked.” This statement indicates a close, positive relationship between teachers and parents.

Positive emotions

The description of happiness felt by teachers of children with special needs through positive emotions with feelings of joy, inspired by the spirit of children with special needs, excited, comfortable, interested, funny, touched, sincere, patient, unique, and proud. Feelings that give rise to positive emotions are more dominant especially when interacting with children with special needs. Interactions with children with special needs that give rise to these

emotions are not only when teaching, but also when meeting in public places as expressed by FY,
"... I feel excited, especially when I meet them outside, I feel like interacting with them and being happy."

Carrying out learning with children with special needs, dealing with uncertainties, it is not uncommon for children with special needs to behave aggressively to the point of hurting because of the limited communication they have so that they need emotional management skills. Emotional management is carried out when teaching or dealing with children with special needs, such as being patient, trying to be calm so that they can imitate and the reactions shown subside. All respondents said that emotional control was carried out by diverting to the positive emotions needed, such as trying to be enthusiastic. Feelings of gratitude were felt by all respondents, regarding how they carried out their work as a daily routine. The gratitude felt by respondents such as being able to get the opportunity to work in the field of children with special needs so that they could contribute, while carrying out the profession as a teacher gave many positive emotions.

Optimism

Realistic optimism by not giving up easily, considering problems as challenges, focusing on the goals of the learning program, and appreciating every little process of the child. Teaching children with special needs has various challenges, one of which is limited abilities and different from children in general, so that special treatment is needed to overcome the limitations they have.

" Well, it's called ABK, some of them are sometimes slow to understand the lesson, so they have to start over again, it's okay, it's a process, I'll correct it again, oh maybe the method is lacking, or something else," MF

Regarding the process of teaching children with special needs. Teachers have an important role to guide and provide services according to the needs of children with special needs. Children with special needs have different special characteristics. This was expressed by respondents with the following statements by NM and IM.

"..what are they, they vary",

" They are unique, even what I learned in college is actually different from what is in the field ."

Teachers of children with special needs are confident that their students will achieve the expected development even though it takes a long time and more effort, this was expressed by the majority of respondents.

" For example, if the child is not in the mood, because sometimes children with special needs do not easily accept the material given, so it takes a long time to provide that material compared to other materials. So you have to be extra patient." IM

"Yes, it's called ABK, their ability to understand is different, so we have to be smart in giving lessons, of course it has to be repeated, it can't be done just once, that's very rare. Usually I will introspect, oh maybe use this method, that method, like that." MF

These limitations are a challenge for teachers to provide services, so that their students are able to develop according to expectations. Teachers have expectations that are oriented towards happiness not only for themselves but also for others, represented by the following FY statement.

" So hopefully I can continue to provide benefits for other people, and always think positively, don't do anything, hopefully whatever the situation is, I can survive, fight for it, and get through it ."

Discovery of meaning

The discovery of meaning in daily life experienced by respondents such as, feeling useful to others, helping others. Carrying out daily activities by applying the strengths of character possessed by the individual, such as curiosity, creativity, open-mindedness. An attitude of tolerance was found as something that gave happiness to teachers of children with special needs, this can be seen from how teachers provide services to students without discrimination. Teachers understand all behavior that appears in children with special needs. Several teachers shared experiences regarding aggressive behavior of students such as biting, scratching, spitting, and kicking, but teachers felt that it was not something big. Teachers were able to forgive and find alternative solutions so that the incident did not happen again and could be controlled. One teacher felt flow when working as expressed by MF,

"I didn't even feel it was time to go home, because I was just enjoying it."

Involvement

Involvement is realized by doing activities that are liked, balancing work with entertainment, carrying out tasks as well as possible. In carrying out their profession, teachers need to learn various new things and how to overcome them. Doing work as a teacher of children with special needs is part of the career achievements of all respondents, and is their goal.

Being a special needs teacher is still rare, but they have been able to guide children with special needs and help parents find solutions to the problems they have regarding the growth and development of special children. According to one of the EYW respondents,

"..there are still many who don't know much about them, especially teachers for special needs children, in my opinion, they are still rare, so by providing information to parents, it makes me feel proud, happy to be able to help, accompany the growth and development of their children.."

Based on this statement, it is implied that, by working as a teacher for children with special needs, respondents experience many positive emotions when doing it, and give something big to other people.

In carrying out work as a special needs teacher, often get appreciation that is not as expected, for example parents of children with special needs who feel they do not get the right service or do not get the results they want after carrying out learning at the institution. Not infrequently, teachers feel down, disappointed, annoyed, because they

feel unable and unable to achieve goals as expected. The problems faced by teachers do not affect the work of the respondents, they try to work as well as possible, are able to manage emotions well, try to maintain balance by controlling negative and positive things. When this happens, respondents state that they do not think too much in the long term about it because everything requires a process, and each child has different abilities. Respondents try to find other ways for children to be able to achieve the expected goals, if they cannot do it themselves, they will ask for help from colleagues by *sharing*, helping to teach, or replacing the main teacher. After that, the teacher provides assistance to parents to realize that each child's abilities cannot be equated, and encourages parents not to compare their child's process with other people's children.

When experiencing unpleasant events, respondents mentioned choosing to divert their emotions, so they can continue their work well. One respondent said he was able to divert his attention when meeting special needs students, because he felt that meeting them was medicine. Here is what EYW said,

"I once felt really sick in the morning before work, and the same thing happened when I left for work. I felt really weak, but when I met the children, the pain went away. They were like medicine."

Another respondent, FY, shared how he overcame unpleasant experiences but still tried to be professional in his work.

"At that time my grandmother passed away in Surabaya, I wanted to ask for permission not to teach, but if I think about it, it feels like a shame, because they need me, it's not good for my other friends because I'm full, but I just enjoy it, after teaching I can go home first, at that time I was really panicking but when I met the children it eased up a bit, I definitely thought about it, but it wasn't that bad, because of what, it's just a shame."

Carrying out positive activities to develop oneself is another option made by respondents, for example attending webinars on the growth and development of children with special needs, therapy for children with special needs, doing activities that they like such as buying their favorite food, going to their favorite place to calm down.

Spirituality

Spirituality is one of the character strengths possessed by teachers while carrying out their duties. The attitude of patience, gratitude, feeling sufficient for what is owned, and being able to interpret everything positively are part of the values of belief held by respondents. always remembering God, carrying out duties wholeheartedly with the intention of worship, as shown by respondent MF,

"Because I myself can never imagine how it would be when I was given a child with such advantages to be able to accept it with such an open heart. So I am more grateful. Don't forget because Allah created His creatures differently so no matter what we are given the generosity

to accompany must be very grateful. Consider it an act of worship."

Work Experience

The difference in work experience time, provides a more meaningful view of work as a teacher of children with special needs. Respondents EYW, FY, NM who have more than five years of work experience, admitted to enjoying their work more, even when asked about the range of the value of the feeling of pleasure of being a teacher of children with special needs, it was quite high, namely 9/10. Other respondents stated that they were happy with their work, but did not have a deep or detailed meaning about it. Like IM's statement,

"How much, I think 7, because ummm I enjoy it, I just enjoy teaching, I'm confused."

Income

The salary received by teachers of children with special needs, some feel sufficient and others feel lacking. But this is not a big problem because it does not affect the positive feelings that arise when working. This can also be influenced by the background of respondents who already have families and those who do not, so that it affects the fulfillment of daily needs. Based on interviews, respondents explained that it is not only income that makes feelings of happiness, but also good relationships with coworkers, and working according to the workload.

Based on the results of interviews and observations with special education teachers, the meaning of happiness found the main themes, namely relationships with others, positive emotions, optimism, finding meaning, involvement, spirituality, work experience and income.

DISCUSSION

The discussion explains the results of the research in accordance with previous research, critically analyzed with the current relevant literature. The discussion should end with conclusions and recommendations.

Based on the results of data analysis on the happiness of special education teachers, there are five important themes regarding their views on the meaning of happiness. The happiness felt by special education teachers is based on positive relationships with others, positive emotions, finding meaning, optimism, and involvement. Positive relationships with coworkers such as cooperation, cooperativeness, and kinship. Relevant to previous research findings, interpersonal relationships are the most significant predictors of subjective happiness of teachers (Lopes & Oliveira, 2020). The role of the strength of relationships with coworkers predicts subjective well-being of teachers (Weiland, 2021). Teachers' trust in coworkers causally increases subjective happiness (Tsuyuguchi, 2023). Trust in teachers' coworkers is found from mutual assistance, compactness, and kinship.

Positive emotions are obtained by teachers through interactions with students and colleagues, such as happy,

excited, exciting, unique, touched, interested, and proud. The emotional perception of teachers who show sincere positive emotional expressions spontaneously tend to enjoy life so that they are able to achieve happiness (Burić & Wang, 2024). In carrying out learning, it is not uncommon for special education teachers to deal with aggressive student behavior, so that they carry out emotional control which requires emotional intelligence skills to control themselves in expressing emotions according to conditions and situations. Previous research states that emotional intelligence that measures emotional regulation and self-control can predict happiness (Salavera & Urbón, 2024). Teachers' emotions are related to their well-being, it was found that deep acting which is defined as a conscious modification of one's inner feelings by reassessing current events to express the necessary emotions (Peng et al., 2023). Good emotional management skills are possessed by teachers of children with special needs, because all emotions that arise intensely involve self-management to continue carrying out tasks and achieving learning goals (Ritchie et al., 2023). Differences in work experience contribute to emotional management skills in teachers of children with special needs related to happiness. In line with previous research, it was found that teachers with more than 10 years of work experience had the highest scores in happiness compared to other colleagues (Tan & Majid, 2011).

The discovery of meaning is obtained by teachers based on the individual's ability to use their character in carrying out their daily work as teachers of children with special needs with gratitude. Gratitude influences positive emotions, relationships with others, the discovery of meaning and the achievement of special education teachers (Sudrawati & Qodariah, 2019). Helping others through work such as providing information to others and sharing brings happiness (Aydoğdu et al., 2023). Researchers found that teachers showed happiness in their daily lives with positive attitudes such as tolerance, empathy, and character strengths such as curiosity, creativity, spirituality, and open-mindedness so that they have a quality work life. Involvement is seen in how they carry out activities in their daily lives with enthusiasm and do activities they like. Fully involving themselves in daily activities provides a good quality of life, in line with previous research findings, happiness is related to components in the quality of work life (Toulabi et al., 2013). Eudemonic happiness in teachers is correlated with happiness and life satisfaction (Salavera et al., 2024). The attitude of patience, gratitude, and being able to interpret everything positively is part of the values of belief held by respondents. Previous research findings showed significant results between spirituality in work, subjective happiness, and gratitude (Mahipalan & S, 2019). Gratitude, forgiveness, correlate with each other with a meaningful life orientation (Chan, 2013). Teacher job satisfaction is associated with teachers' subjective well-being (Shoshani & Eldor, 2016).

Optimism is shown from the teacher's response during the teaching process, such as being confident in the child's small developments, not giving up easily, considering

problems as challenges, and focusing on goals. Psychological characteristics of teachers related to well-being are hope, enthusiasm, emotional intelligence, emotional working methods, and personality (Bardach et al., 2022).

The spirituality of teachers of children with special needs is a factor in the character of teachers of children with special needs shown by an attitude of patience, gratitude, remembering God, carrying out tasks wholeheartedly. Teachers who have spiritual experiences influence teacher happiness and teacher performance (Aziz et al., 2011; Mahipalan & S, 2019). Spiritual strength can strengthen emotions when faced with difficult times as one of human needs (Nash et al., 2021). This strengthens the research findings that the spirituality factor possessed by teachers of children with special needs influences happiness in carrying out the profession.

Work experience of special education teachers makes them enjoy their job. Special education teachers who enjoy their work give their professional identity a boost that affects their happiness. This is relevant to research before, that professional identity that someone has in their work has a significant impact on their happiness in their work (Chen et al., 2022). Other studies have also found a positive relationship between length of service and the happiness of teachers who have high happiness at work (Hasanati & Istiqomah, 2024).

Income has a significant impact on the happiness and positive emotions experienced by special education teachers. Income affects the behavior of teacher performance and is more involved in job satisfaction so that they feel happy (Hasanati & Istiqomah, 2024). Another study found that income has a significant and direct influence on individual teacher happiness (Yang et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

The study attempted to find the meaning of happiness experienced by teachers of children with special needs, finding results that can be concluded that the happiness of teachers of children with special needs is found in the main themes, namely, positive relationships with others, positive emotions, involvement, finding meaning, and optimism. Factors that influence happiness in teachers of children with special needs are spirituality, length of work experience, and income.

This study has weaknesses, as a consideration for further research, the limitations of the study lie in the research method chosen using semi-structured interviews, research questions between respondents are different, due to the number of questions that increase during the session and it is difficult to validate the data. Suggestions for further researchers are that it is necessary to conduct several in-depth interviews or use data collection methods with data collection with open surveys/questionnaires aimed at teachers of children with special needs. Advice to teachers is to focus on the vision and mission of the institution, always increase gratitude in facing and overcoming difficulties so as to foster a sense of happiness.

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