

Instructional Competencies of Special Education Teachers in the Division of Zamboanga City, Philippines: Basis for a Training Program

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ABSTRACT

Effective inclusive education depends on the instructional competence of Special Education (SpEd) teachers, yet evidence on how this competence is distributed, perceived, and supported through professional development remains limited in the Philippine local-government-unit context. This study assessed the instructional competencies of SpEd teachers in the Schools Division of Zamboanga City, Philippines, as a basis for a professional training program. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, survey data were gathered from 157 SpEd, master, and receiving teachers and 17 school administrators (N = 174), supplemented by semi-structured interviews. Respondents rated instructional competencies across five domains: classroom management, teacher qualifications, subject-matter proficiency, instructional methodologies, and research and community participation.

Results showed that SpEd teachers were rated "Very Competent" in classroom management (AWM = 4.5), subject-matter proficiency (AWM = 4.3), and instructional methodologies (AWM = 4.2), "Competent" in qualifications (AWM = 4.1), and only "Moderately Competent" in research and community participation (AWM = 3.3). Independent-samples t-tests revealed no statistically significant difference between administrators' and teachers' perceptions across all five domains ($p > .05$ in every case), indicating shared understanding of instructional strengths and needs. Teachers identified handling classroom disruptions, emotional and physical well-being, and resource availability as their most pressing challenges. A proposed training program, "Empowering Special Education Teachers: Mastering Instructional Competencies for Inclusive Education," was rated Very Acceptable (AWM = 4.8), Very Suitable (AWM = 4.8), and Very Feasible (AWM = 4.2) by respondents. Findings underscore the need for differentiated, career-stage-responsive professional development that strengthens research engagement and classroom-behavior support for SpEd teachers. Implications for inclusive-education policy and practice in similar decentralized school divisions are discussed.

Keywords: *instructional competencies; special education teachers; inclusive education; professional development; training program; mixed-methods research; Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a central policy priority worldwide, and the Philippines is no exception. As access expands for learners with special educational needs (SEN), the instructional competence of Special Education (SpEd) teachers has emerged as a decisive factor in translating inclusive-education policy into classroom practice (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2019). Effective SpEd teaching draws on an interdependent set of

competencies — classroom management, subject-matter mastery, pedagogical skill, professional qualifications, and engagement in research and community work — that together determine whether learners with SEN receive instruction matched to their needs (Tomlinson, 2020).

Continuous professional development is widely recognized as the mechanism through which these competencies are built and sustained (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2020; Ingersoll & Strong, 2021). In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has formally acknowledged this need through policies supporting the continuing development of SpEd teachers (DepEd, 2019), yet the extent to which teachers in specific school divisions are equipped to meet these expectations is rarely documented empirically. Classroom management is one of the clearest expressions of this competence gap: well-managed inclusive classrooms are associated with higher engagement and learning among students with SEN (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003; Kounin, 1970), but managing behavior in heterogeneous, resource-constrained classrooms remains a persistent difficulty for many teachers.

Subject-matter proficiency compounds this challenge. Teachers cannot adapt content effectively for diverse learners without a secure grasp of what they teach (Shulman, 1986; Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008), and the pedagogical adaptations required for SEN learners — exemplified by frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014) — place additional demands on instructional methodology beyond those faced by general-education teachers. Whether school administrators and teachers converge or diverge in how they judge these competencies is itself consequential: shared understanding between supervisors and practitioners is a precondition for coherent, well-targeted professional development (Fernandez, 2021).

Despite the growing body of international literature on inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Linklater, 2010; Szumski, Smogorzewska, & Grygiel, 2020), few studies have empirically profiled the instructional competencies of SpEd teachers within a single Philippine schools division and used the results to design and validate a responsive training program. This gap is significant because training needs are shaped by local context — caseloads, resource availability, administrative support structures, and teacher experience profiles — that differ across divisions and regions (Gonzalez, 2019).

This study addressed that gap by assessing the instructional competencies of SpEd teachers in the Schools Division of Zamboanga City, examining whether administrators' and teachers' perceptions of those competencies converge, identifying the specific challenges teachers face in practice, and using the findings to design and validate a professional training program. In doing so, the study contributes empirical, division-level evidence to the broader international literature on building instructional capacity for inclusive education.

Statement of the Problem

This study assessed the instructional competencies of SpEd teachers in the Schools Division of Zamboanga City, Philippines, as a basis for developing a professional training program. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of (a) type of respondent, (b) number of years in teaching, and (c) educational attainment?
2. What are the instructional competencies of SpEd teachers, as evaluated by school administrators and teachers, in terms of (a) classroom management, (b) teacher qualifications, (c) subject-matter proficiency, (d) instructional methodologies, and (e) research and community participation?
3. Is there a significant difference between the perceptions of school administrators and SpEd teachers regarding the instructional competencies of SpEd teachers?
4. What specific challenges do SpEd teachers encounter in relation to handling disruptions, classroom organization, support systems, resource availability, administrative support, student diversity, collaboration and communication, and emotional and physical well-being?
5. What recommendations can be drawn from the findings of the study?
6. How acceptable, suitable, and feasible is the proposed professional training program, as assessed by the respondents?

Hypotheses

7. SpEd teachers demonstrate high instructional competencies across classroom management, qualifications, subject-matter proficiency, instructional methodologies, and research and community participation.
8. There is no significant difference between the perceptions of school administrators and SpEd teachers regarding the instructional competencies of SpEd teachers.
9. SpEd teachers face significant challenges related to handling disruptions, classroom organization, support systems, resource availability, administrative support, student diversity, collaboration and communication, and emotional and physical well-being.
10. The proposed training program is viewed as highly acceptable, suitable, and feasible by the respondents.

Significance of the Study

The findings offer SpEd teachers an evidence base for identifying instructional strengths and development needs; provide school administrators and DepEd division officials with empirical grounds for allocating professional-development resources; and contribute to the broader international literature on building teacher capacity for inclusive education in decentralized, resource-constrained school systems. The resulting training program provides a transferable model that other schools divisions facing similar constraints may adapt.

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

This study is anchored on five complementary theoretical perspectives that jointly frame the instructional competencies under investigation.

Shulman's (1986) theory of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) holds that effective teaching requires an integration of subject-matter knowledge with knowledge of how to teach that subject to particular learners — an integration that is especially critical for SpEd teachers, who must adapt content for heterogeneous learning profiles. PCK grounds the assessment of subject-matter proficiency and instructional methodology in this study.

Kounin's (1970) model of classroom management emphasizes withitness, momentum, and smoothness in lesson pacing as determinants of student engagement and reduced disruption. This model informs the assessment of classroom-management competence.

Darling-Hammond's teacher-quality framework (Darling-Hammond, 2000) links teacher qualifications, continuous professional development, and accumulated teaching experience to instructional effectiveness, providing the basis for evaluating teacher qualifications in this study.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL; Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014) advocates instructional environments that proactively accommodate learner variability through multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. UDL principles inform the evaluation of instructional methodologies and, by extension, research and community engagement that extends inclusive practice beyond the classroom.

Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior explains how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control shape intentions and, in turn, actions and judgments. This theory frames the comparative analysis of how administrators' and teachers' distinct roles and vantage points may (or may not) shape their perceptions of instructional competence.

Together, these frameworks connect established theory in teacher effectiveness, classroom management, inclusive pedagogy, and social-psychological theory to the empirical questions this study investigates.

Related Literature

International and Philippine-based literature converges on several themes relevant to this study. Differentiated instruction customizes teaching methods and materials to individual learning needs and is positioned as a cornerstone of inclusive practice (Tomlinson, 2020). Continuous professional development is consistently associated with improved and sustained teaching quality (Ingersoll & Strong, 2021; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2020), a link explicitly recognized in Philippine policy through DepEd's continuing professional development guidelines for teachers (DepEd, 2016, 2019).

Classroom management research indicates that well-managed classrooms foster higher levels of engagement and achievement (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003), while behavioral disruption remains one of the most frequently reported difficulties for SpEd teachers internationally (Humphrey & Symes, 2019; Oliver & Reschly, 2020). Subject-matter and pedagogical-content knowledge remain foundational to teaching quality (Shulman, 1986; Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008), and teacher-preparation reform literature continues to call for stronger integration between general and special education teacher training (Blanton, Pugach, & Boveda, 2021).

Studies on inclusive pedagogy from the United Kingdom and elsewhere emphasize that effective inclusion is less about individualized remediation and more about restructuring everyday teaching to be responsive to the full range of learners in a classroom (Florian & Beaton, 2018; Florian & Linklater, 2010). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that teacher attitudes toward inclusion, resource adequacy, and administrative support jointly predict the quality of inclusive practice (Szumski, Smogorzewska, & Grygiel, 2020), a finding echoed in studies on resource access (Mitchell, 2020) and administrative support (McLeskey & Waldron, 2020; Gonzalez & Mahon, 2021).

Research participation and community engagement, by contrast, remain comparatively under-examined and under-practiced dimensions of SpEd teacher competence (Santos, 2020), despite their role in sustaining evidence-informed, locally responsive inclusive-education practice. Taken together, this literature establishes both the theoretical rationale and the empirical precedent for examining instructional competencies, perceptual alignment between teachers and administrators, and training-program design within a single Philippine schools division — the gap this study addresses.

METHODS

Research Design

This study used a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) that combined quantitative survey data with qualitative interview data to examine the instructional competencies, perceptions, challenges, and training needs of SpEd teachers. Quantitative and qualitative strands were collected concurrently and integrated during interpretation, allowing statistical patterns in competency ratings to be contextualized by teachers' and administrators' own accounts of practice.

Participants and Study Site

The study was conducted within the Schools Division of Zamboanga City, Zamboanga Peninsula (Region IX), Philippines, across public schools offering special education programs. A total of 174 respondents participated: 157 teachers (comprising SpEd teachers, master teachers, and receiving teachers), randomly sampled, and 17 school administrators, purposively selected as one designated administrator per participating special-education school.

Research Instruments

Two researcher-adapted survey instruments were used; both anchored on a five-point Likert scale. The first, the Instructional Competencies of SpEd Teachers Questionnaire, comprised three parts: (a) respondent demographic profile; (b) instructional-competency ratings across the five domains examined in this study, scored from 1 (Not Competent) to 5 (Very Competent); and (c) an assessment of challenges encountered across eight categories — handling disruptions, classroom organization, support systems, resource availability, administrative support, student diversity, collaboration and communication, and emotional and physical well-being — together with two open-ended items inviting additional unlisted challenges and improvement suggestions. The second instrument, the Acceptability, Suitability, and Feasibility Questionnaire, evaluated the proposed training program on the same five-point scale for each of its three constructs. Semi-structured interviews with purposively selected teachers and administrators (Braun & Clarke, 2019) supplemented both instruments, exploring perspectives on teaching practice, challenges, and improvement suggestions in greater depth.

Data Gathering Procedures

Following approval from the Schools Division Superintendent, data were collected over three months (June–September 2024). Respondents completed the survey instrument through a self-administered online form; audio-recorded semi-structured interviews followed with a subset of respondents. After the initial results were analyzed, the researcher developed the proposed training program, which respondents then rated using the acceptability, suitability, and feasibility instrument.

Statistical and Thematic Treatment of Data

Weighted means (WM) and average weighted means (AWM) were computed to determine competency and challenge levels, using five-point verbal-interpretation scales (e.g., Very Competent, Competent, Moderately Competent, Least Competent, Not Competent for the competency instrument; parallel scales for challenge severity and for acceptability, suitability, and feasibility). Independent-samples t-tests ($\alpha = .05$) compared administrators' and teachers' mean ratings across the five competency domains (Field, 2021). Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2019), with codes iteratively refined and cross-checked against audio-visual records to ensure consistency with respondents' quantitative ratings.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Schools Division Superintendent and complied with DepEd's no-disruption-of-classes policy. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to enrollment, participation was voluntary with the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and data confidentiality was maintained in accordance with the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173).

RESULTS

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 174 respondents. Teachers comprised 90% of the sample (SpEd teachers 67%, receiving teachers 20%, master teachers 3%), and administrators comprised the remaining 10%. The largest teaching-experience band was 6–10 years (31%), followed by 1–5 years (25%); notably, only 2% of teacher-respondents had 21 or more years of experience, while 59% of administrators fell into this most-experienced band — a pattern consistent with an early-career teaching workforce supervised by seasoned administrators. Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (42%) or master's-degree units (35%), with smaller proportions holding a doctorate (6%) or doctoral units (3%).

Table 1 *Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 174)*

Demographic Variable	Category	f	%	Total
Type of respondent	SpEd teachers	116	67	174
	Receiving teachers	34	20	
	School administrators	17	10	
	Master teachers	6	3	
Teaching experience	6–10 years	49	31	174
	1–5 years	39	25	
	11–15 years	32	19	
	21 years and above	29	17	
	16–20 years	25	13	
Educational attainment	Bachelor's degree	72	42	174

With master's units	60	35
Master's degree	27	16
Doctorate degree	10	6
With doctoral units	5	3

Note. WM = weighted mean; percentages are rounded and computed within respondent type.

Instructional Competencies of SpEd Teachers

Table 2 summarizes SpEd teachers' instructional competencies across the five domains examined, as rated by teachers and administrators. Overall, SpEd teachers were rated "Very Competent" in classroom management (AWM = 4.5), the highest-rated domain, followed by subject-matter proficiency (AWM = 4.3) and instructional methodologies (AWM = 4.2). Teacher qualifications were rated "Competent" (AWM = 4.1), while research and community participation was the lowest-rated domain at "Moderately Competent" (AWM = 3.3).

Table 2 *Summary of Instructional Competencies of SpEd Teachers by Domain*

Instructional Competency Domain	Teachers WM	Admin. WM	AWM	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Classroom management	4.5	4.5	1		
Subject-matter proficiency	4.4	4.3	2		
Instructional methodologies	4.2	4.2	3		
Teacher qualifications	4.1	4.1	4		
Research and community participation	3.4	3.3	5		
Overall composite mean	4.1	4.1	4.1	Competent	—

Note. WM = weighted mean; AWM = average weighted mean; VC = Very Competent (4.20–5.00); C = Competent (3.40–4.19); MC = Moderately Competent (2.60–3.39).

Within classroom management, applying safety rules and regulations to prevent accidents received the single highest item rating (AWM = 4.6), while within research, generating income from parents, licenses, copyrights, and other research outputs received the lowest item rating across the entire instrument (AWM = 2.3), indicating that research monetization and, more broadly, sustained research engagement remain underdeveloped among SpEd teachers relative to their classroom-facing competencies.

Comparison of Administrators' and Teachers' Perceptions

Table 3 presents the independent-samples t-test results comparing administrators' and teachers' mean ratings across the five competency domains. No statistically significant difference emerged in any domain at $\alpha = .05$, indicating that administrators and teachers held convergent views of SpEd teachers' instructional competencies.

Table 3 *Independent-Samples t-Test Results Comparing Administrators' and Teachers' Perceptions of Instructional Competencies*

Competency Category	t	p-value	α	Decision
Classroom management	-0.704	.482	$p > .05$	Not significant
Teacher qualifications	-0.545	.587	$p > .05$	Not significant
Subject proficiency	0.223	.824	$p > .05$	Not significant
Instructional methodologies	0.050	.996	$p > .05$	Not significant
Research and community participation	-0.573	.567	$p > .05$	Not significant

Note. Degrees of freedom based on $N = 174$ ($n_1 = 157$ teachers, $n_2 = 17$ administrators); decision rule: reject H_0 if $p < .05$.

Challenges Encountered by SpEd Teachers

Table 4 presents the challenges SpEd teachers encounter in practice. Handling classroom disruptions was rated the most challenging concern overall (AWM = 4.5), followed closely by emotional and physical well-being (AWM = 4.3) and resource availability (AWM = 4.1). Support systems were rated the least severe challenge among the eight categories (AWM = 3.2), although still falling within the "Moderately Challenging" range, and the composite weighted mean across all categories (AWM = 3.9) indicates that SpEd teachers experience the surveyed challenges as, on balance, "Very Challenging."

Table 4 *Specific Challenges Encountered by SpEd Teachers*

Challenge Category	Teachers WM	Admin. WM	AWM	VI	Rank
Handling disruptions	4.3	4.7	4.5	Most Challenging	1
Emotional and physical well-being	4.5	4.1	4.3	Most Challenging	2
Resource availability	4.0	4.2	4.1	Very Challenging	3
Student diversity	4.0	3.8	3.9	Very Challenging	4
Classroom organization	3.6	4.0	3.8	Very Challenging	5
Administrative support	3.5	3.9	3.7	Very Challenging	6
Collaboration and communication	3.6	3.4	3.5	Very Challenging	7
Support systems	3.2	3.2	3.2	Moderately Challenging	8
Composite weighted mean	3.8	3.9	3.9	Very Challenging	—

Note. WM = weighted mean; AWM = average weighted mean; scale: Most Challenging (4.20–5.00) to Least Challenging (1.00–1.79).

Thematic analysis of the interview data converged with these ratings. Teachers described feeling under-equipped to manage disruptive behavior without adequate behavioral-support structures; described classroom organization as constrained by limited space and materials for SEN learners; and reported communication gaps with mainstream teachers, specialists, and parents that complicated collaborative planning. Several teachers also described cumulative workload and emotional strain arising from the combination of high caseload diversity and limited peer or administrative support — findings that corroborate the quantitative rankings in Table 4.

Acceptability, Suitability, and Feasibility of the Proposed Training Program

Following analysis of the competency and challenge data, the researcher developed a professional training program, "Empowering Special Education Teachers: Mastering Instructional Competencies for Inclusive Education," addressing the five competency domains and the highest-ranked challenges identified above. Table 5 presents respondents' evaluation of this program.

Table 5 *Acceptability, Suitability, and Feasibility of the Proposed Training Program*

Evaluation Criterion	AWM	Verbal Interpretation	Rating Band
Acceptability	4.8	Very Acceptable	4.20–5.00
Suitability	4.8	Very Suitable	4.20–5.00
Feasibility	4.2	Very Feasible	4.20–5.00

Note. Scale: *Very (Acceptable/Suitable/Feasible)* = 4.20–5.00; *(Acceptable/Suitable/Feasible)* = 3.40–4.19.

The program was rated Very Acceptable (AWM = 4.8) and Very Suitable (AWM = 4.8), particularly for its alignment with current trends in special education and its capacity to foster collaboration among SpEd teachers, general-education teachers, and other stakeholders. Feasibility was rated somewhat lower, though still Very Feasible overall (AWM = 4.2); respondents flagged adaptability of the training to varied school contexts and the risk of disruption to daily responsibilities as areas warranting further attention during implementation.

DISCUSSION

The competency profile that emerged — strong classroom-management and subject-proficiency ratings alongside comparatively weak research and community participation — is consistent with a workforce that has internalized the day-to-day, classroom-facing demands of PCK (Shulman, 1986) and classroom management (Kounin, 1970), while professional identity and incentive structures have not yet extended equally to the research and community-engagement components envisioned by UDL-informed inclusive practice (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). This pattern echoes prior findings that research engagement remains an under-practiced dimension of SpEd teacher competence even where classroom skills are well developed (Santos, 2020), and it suggests that professional-development investment has, to date, been weighted toward classroom-facing skills at the expense of the research and community dimensions that sustain evidence-informed practice over time.

The absence of statistically significant differences between administrators' and teachers' perceptions across all five domains is a notable finding in light of Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior, which would predict that differing roles, incentives, and vantage points could plausibly produce divergent judgments. Instead, the convergence observed here suggests a shared institutional understanding of what constitutes competent SpEd instruction within this division — an alignment that removes a common barrier to professional-development buy-in, since administrators and teachers are not starting from competing assessments of need (Fernandez, 2021).

The challenge profile — disruption management, emotional and physical well-being, and resource availability as the top three concerns — mirrors international findings that behavior management and resource constraints remain persistent difficulties in inclusive classrooms regardless of setting (Humphrey & Symes, 2019; Mitchell, 2020). Notably, teachers rated emotional and physical well-being as their second-most pressing challenge, an occupational-health dimension that receives comparatively less attention in Philippine SpEd professional-development literature than instructional-skill deficits, and one that the proposed training program's designers should treat as a design requirement rather than a peripheral concern.

The high acceptability and suitability ratings, alongside a somewhat lower but still strongly positive feasibility rating, together indicate that the proposed training program is conceptually well matched to teachers' expressed needs, while implementation — particularly adapting the program across heterogeneous school contexts without disrupting ongoing instructional responsibilities — will require deliberate scheduling and contextual flexibility. This distinction between conceptual fit and operational feasibility is consistent with broader implementation-science findings that professional-development programs succeed or fail less on content design than on the logistics of delivery (McLeskey & Waldron, 2020; Forlin & Chambers, 2021).

CONCLUSION

SpEd teachers in the Schools Division of Zamboanga City demonstrated strong classroom-facing instructional competencies — particularly in classroom management, subject-matter proficiency, and instructional methodologies — but comparatively underdeveloped engagement in research and community participation. Administrators and teachers held convergent perceptions of these competencies across all five domains, providing a shared foundation for targeted professional development. Handling classroom disruptions, sustaining emotional and physical well-being, and securing adequate instructional resources emerged as the most pressing challenges teachers face in practice. The proposed training program, grounded directly in these findings, was evaluated as highly acceptable and suitable and as feasible for implementation, positioning it as a viable, evidence-based model for strengthening SpEd instructional capacity — one that other schools divisions facing comparable demographic and resource profiles may adapt to their own inclusive-education contexts.

Recommendations

1. Develop and implement comprehensive, division-wide training programs that strengthen SpEd teachers' innovative-teaching, behavior-management, and subject-matter skills.
2. Establish a collaborative support system that formally connects SpEd and general-education teachers for peer sharing, mentoring, and emotional support.
3. Ensure adequate provision of teaching materials, assistive technology, and other instructional resources to special-education classrooms.
4. Create structured incentives and opportunities for SpEd teachers' research and community-based engagement, addressing the lowest-rated competency domain identified in this study.
5. Institute regular monitoring and evaluation of the training program's effectiveness, incorporating continuous feedback from teachers and administrators.
6. Conduct longitudinal follow-up studies examining the training program's sustained effects on classroom-management skill and instructional practice over time.

Limitations of the Study

This study is bounded by its cross-sectional design, its focus on a single school's division, and its reliance on self- and administrator-reported ratings, which may be subject to social-desirability and self-assessment bias. The competency and program-evaluation instruments were adapted for this study and had not undergone formal psychometric validation prior to use. Findings should therefore be interpreted as division-specific evidence rather than as generalizable to all SpEd teachers nationally, and future research should pursue instrument validation and multi-division replication to test the generalizability of the competency and challenge profiles reported here.

Declarations**Conflict of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Schools Division Superintendent of the Schools Division of Zamboanga City and was conducted in accordance with the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173).

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to data-privacy restrictions on respondent-identifiable information.

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