

Teaching from Within: Emotional Regulations, Relational and Professional Learning to Competence in Special Needs Education

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Abstract

Teaching competence continues to be inconsistently developed. I explored the perceptions of teachers on their competence in handling learners with special needs using qualitative descriptive research design. I gathered data from in-depth interviews with six purposively selected receiving teachers, and analyzed the data gathered using thematic approach. Consequently, I found that teachers viewed their competence in supporting learners with special needs as shaped by their personal qualities, effective use of flexible and individualized teaching strategies, and supportive environmental factors like collaboration, resources, and institutional support. With this, education practitioners may maximize resources by using reflective activities, flexible instruction, collaboration, training, peer mentoring, and grounding routines to strengthen compassion, emotional awareness, and effectiveness in supporting learners with special needs. Future research may apply multiple linear regression and exploratory factor analysis to predict teacher competence and validate measurement instruments using identified personal, behavioral, environmental, professional, relational, and emotional regulation factors.

Keywords: Teaching from within, emotional regulations, relational and professional learning to competence in special needs education

1. Introduction

Teaching competence, despite its centrality to educational success, remains undervalued and inconsistently developed across educational systems (Jentsch & König, 2022). Research indicated that while teacher competence is recognized as a key determinant of instructional quality and student learning, its practical embodiment remains fragmented and often superficial, lacking the depth and consistency needed for sustained professional impact (Mak et al., 2023).

Globally, the deterioration of teacher competence in handling learners with special needs has become an increasing challenge for inclusive education systems. In the United States, studies showed that despite strong inclusion mandates, many general education teachers exhibit declining competence in managing learners with disabilities (Smith & Tyler, 2023). Similarly, in Australia, research indicated that while teacher competence is essential for successful inclusion, many educators continue to feel underqualified and unprepared to meet the behavioral and instructional demands of diverse classrooms (Forlin et al., 2023). These findings collectively point to a global decline in teachers' competence in inclusive settings, underscoring the urgent need for strengthened professional development, mentoring, and institutional support to help teachers effectively support learners with special needs.

In the Philippines, the main problem centers on the limited competence of receiving teachers in effectively handling learners with special needs. In Davao del Norte, teachers exhibited persistent gaps in professional competence necessary for delivering quality instruction (DepEd Davao del Norte, 2025). In Iloilo City, limitations in individualized instruction and classroom management indicated notable deficiencies in behavioral competence for inclusive teaching (Buenavista, 2024). In Pampanga, teachers continue to show unmet needs in maintaining professional competence within inclusive classroom settings (Raguindin, 2025). These documented gaps highlight continuing competence-related challenges among receiving teachers across various regions.

There is limited research on the specific competencies of receiving teachers in mainstream classrooms when working with learners with special needs. If this problem remains unaddressed, learners with special needs may continue to experience inadequate support and unequal learning opportunities in inclusive settings. This study is urgent to ensure that teachers acquire the necessary competencies to effectively implement inclusive education and promote equitable learning outcomes for all students.

Statement of the Problem

In this study, I explored teachers' perceptions of developing competence in working with learners with special needs. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the personal qualities of the teacher that they perceived as factors of their competence in handling learners with special needs?
2. What are the behavioural qualities of the teacher that they perceived as factors of their competence in handling learners with special needs?
3. What are the environmental qualities of the teacher that they perceived as factors of their competence in handling learners with special needs?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

I anchored this study on Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), which posits that the dynamic interaction among behavioral, personal, and environmental influences shapes human functioning. In the context of teacher competence, the theory explains how teachers' actions, decisions, and instructional practices (behavioral factors) interact with their work environment, school climate, available resources, administrative support, and institutional culture (environmental factors). Through this reciprocal process, teachers develop the competence needed to support learners with special needs. This theoretical framework aligns with the study's focus on understanding teachers' lived experiences as shaped by behavioral and environmental conditions.

2. METHODS

In this chapter, I presented the research design, the study locale, the sample and sampling technique, the data-gathering technique, the data analysis, and the trustworthiness.

Research Design

I utilized a qualitative descriptive research design. Qualitative descriptive research design is a flexible, naturalistic approach that aims to provide a clear, straightforward summary of participants' experiences or

perceptions in everyday language, with minimal theoretical interpretation (Doyle et al., 2023). It is commonly used when researchers seek to explore and describe phenomena that are not yet well understood, particularly in real-world contexts such as education and healthcare, where practical, direct insights are needed. This design is especially useful for capturing participants' perspectives accurately and presenting findings in a way that is easily understood and applicable (Sullivan-Bolyai et al, 2024). Its advantages include maintaining closeness to participants' actual words and meanings, offering flexibility in data collection and analysis, ensuring simplicity and clarity in presenting results, and producing findings that are highly relevant for practice and decision-making. Moreover, qualitative descriptive research promotes transparency and reduces excessive abstraction, making it suitable for studies that prioritize actionable and context-based understanding (McCombes, 2023).

Locale of the Study

This study was conducted in selected schools in the Kapalong West District, Division of Davao del Norte, where inclusive education policies are actively implemented, integrating learners with special needs into regular classrooms. These schools aim to ensure that all learners, regardless of their abilities, have access to quality education (DepEd Davao del Norte, 2025). I purposively selected this locale because it provides a relevant context for examining the competence of receiving teachers in handling learners with special needs and the factors that influence it, particularly their personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. Furthermore, while teachers in this district are recognized for their commitment and dedication, many continue to face challenges in addressing the unique learning needs of students with disabilities. Hence, Kapalong West District offers an authentic setting to investigate existing gaps in teacher competence and identify actionable strategies to strengthen inclusive education practices in public schools.

Sample and Sampling Technique

In this study, I purposively selected four Special Education Teachers and two Receiving Teachers employed in Public Elementary Schools. They are teachers handling learners with special needs. They all participated in the in-depth interviews. I used purposive sampling to ensure that only information rich participants, those with the knowledge, perceptions, and characteristics essential to the study, were included, in line with qualitative descriptive research principles of Creswell and Poth (2018) and Palinkas et al. (2015). These criteria ensured that the selected teachers could provide meaningful narratives aligned with the study's aim of understanding how behavioral and environmental factors shape teaching competence.

Data Gathering Technique

To obtain sufficient information from the participants, I followed the procedures required to conduct the study. During data collection, I conducted In-Depth Interviews (IDI) with six teachers, holding one-on-one sessions that typically lasted 30–45 minutes to gather rich qualitative insights. I began by scheduling the interviews at times convenient for the participants. I prepared semi-structured questions that allowed flexibility and deeper probing. During each session, I ensured a comfortable, supportive environment that encouraged participants to openly share their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to the research topic. With their consent, I recorded all interviews and supplemented these recordings with detailed notes to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data.

After the data-gathering phase, I proceeded with the post-collection process. I first transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim, converting the audio data into written form for easier analysis. I then reviewed, cleaned, and organized the transcripts to ensure clarity and remove any irrelevant or repetitive information.

Following this, I subjected the data to expert validation to ensure consistency, reliability, and alignment with the research objectives. Finally, I prepared the processed data for coding and thematic analysis, which enabled me to identify patterns, generate insights, and derive key findings relevant to the study.

Data Analysis

I employed thematic analysis within a qualitative descriptive framework to interpret teachers' perceptions of how they handle learners with special needs. After transcribing the interviews verbatim, I engaged in repeated, immersive reading to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' narratives. The data were coded inductively, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the teachers' descriptions of behavioral and environmental factors that shaped their competence. Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase framework guided the analysis: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This systematic process ensured a rigorous, transparent analysis that captured both commonalities and nuances in participants' lived experiences. Through this method, I identified core themes reflecting how teachers construct meaning, respond to challenges, and develop professional competence in special education contexts.

Trustworthiness

Ethical considerations in data gathering and analysis focused on protecting participants and ensuring the study's trustworthiness. First, I prioritized participants' comfort and safety by creating a respectful environment, obtaining informed consent, and ensuring confidentiality throughout the process. Appropriate measures include anonymizing responses, securing data storage, and allowing participants the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Additionally, the study held the components of trustworthiness: credibility (accurate representation of participants' views), dependability (consistent and transparent procedures), confirmability (neutral interpretation free from researcher bias), and transferability (clear context for applicability). This step maintained the integrity and ethical rigor of the study.

3. RESULTS

In this section of my study, I presented the modified theoretical paradigm, the responses of my study participants, and the summary of my findings.

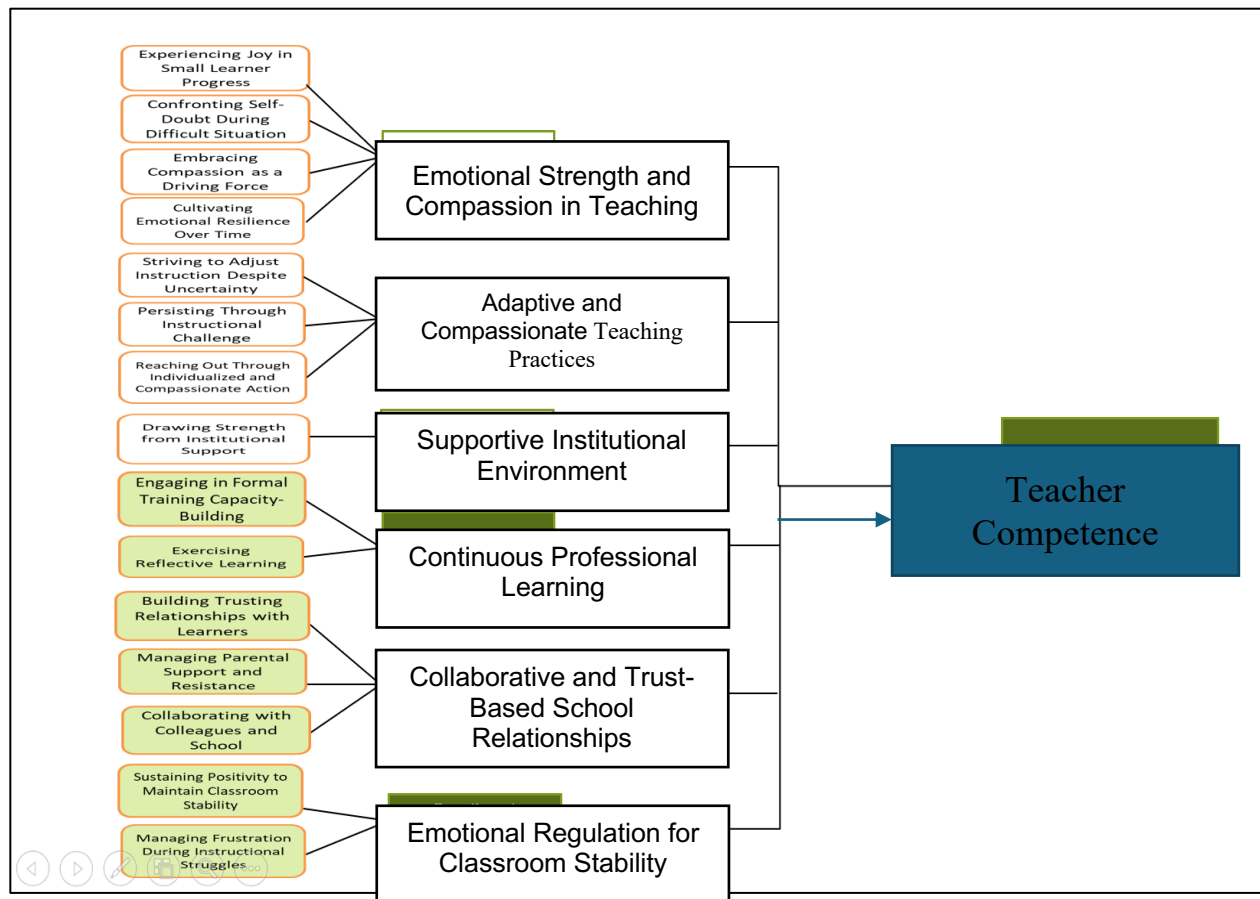


Figure 2: Modified Theoretical Paradigm

Personal Qualities of the Teacher as Factors of Competence in Handling Learners with Special Needs

As I listened to the participants' experience in handling learners with special needs, I felt an immense joy, as if it could fill oceans, especially seeing how their heart overflowed with every small improvement their students made. One of the participants shared:

I felt most capable....ahh... when I saw in them small but significant progress in my learners, uhm...like recognizing letter sound in the alphabet independently, or most importantly like showing improved social interaction... slowly step by step. (IDI-P4)

Hearing a participants' genuine feelings was like watching sunlight slowly break through clouds, their joy shining brightest each time a learner with special needs learned to connect with others, step by step. I was happy when I heard that. But I noticed that my participant does not look at me while speaking. I saw that she was bowing his head. In my observation, it seems his interaction skills are also limited, like a quiet river that flows but rarely meets the shore. While she claimed to develop the students, the other participants felt frustrated utterly powerless, as one of the participants said:

Maka feel ko og least capable if kanang gigamit nako nga materials or instruction dili makuha sa bata, ma feel nako nga oy murag dili man effective, or dili siya nindot. (I feel least capable when the materials or instruction I use are not understood by the learner. I begin to think that maybe my approach is not effective.) (IDI-P6).

I saw how my participant crushed beyond measure when the instruction or materials they use fail to reach the child or do not work well. It was as if they were wounded a thousand times, and my own chest ached endlessly with sympathy as I listened to their words. As I listened to another participant closely, the voice of the participant I spoke with was a trembling thread, carrying the quiet weight of worry when she said:

I found myself questioning whether I should continue because I did not know what to give to the learners. I felt inexperienced and unsure. But I became encouraged and motivated when I realized that if I did not continue, who would support them? Even without much idea or experience, I accepted this challenge as their SNED teacher, so I chose to keep going (IDI-P1).

My heart became a soft vessel of compassion, absorbing every emotion in my participant's words. She was trying to hold back the feeling that she might not be strong enough to handle it all, until such time another participant ignited a fire within me so powerful it felt like it could light up a thousand classrooms as I heard her response, saying:

I believe that every child can learn regardless of disability, and this belief strongly guided my approach. It helped me remain patient, empathetic, and hopeful even on difficult days. Emotionally, there were moments of frustration and exhaustion, but my compassion and commitment to inclusion helped me manage these feelings. (IDI-P3)

Her insights filled me with an overwhelming surge of motivation so immense it seemed to overflow beyond my own limits pushing me to teach with greater passion and to wholeheartedly embrace the challenge of guiding children with special needs. It felt as if I now carried an endless well of strength and purpose within me.

Behavioural Qualities of the Teacher as Factors of Competence in Handling Learners with Special Needs

I felt deep compassion for a teacher who is a tireless flame, burning quietly as she strives to guide her learners with reading difficulties toward the light of literacy. Her voice was not merely sound, but a deep well echoing from the very depths of her heart while she expresses herself, saying:

Sa una naglisod ko, kana lang pagpabasa gyud mobalik gyud ko sa uno kay dili pa mn gyud sila makamao. (At first, I struggled with what to do with the learners. Even with just reading, I would go back to basics because they didn't know yet) (IDI-P2)

She emphasized the importance of using a variety of strategies, depending on the needs of each learner. This was also confirmed by another participant, who deeply shared:

Dapat daghan strategies it depends on the learning needs of the learner. (I have to adjust and think of another strategy to use. There should be many strategies depending on the learner's needs.) (IDI-P5).

As I gazed into my participant's eyes, I saw a determination so powerful it could move mountains and outshine a thousand suns. Her gaze carried an unbreakable promise to guide children with special needs, refusing to measure them against others for whom learning comes as easily as breathing, as she said:

Gina sabot nalang nako nga kini sila nga mga bata is different from others nga dapat dili nimo sila e compare sa uban kay dili man gyud sila the same when it comes sa ilahang needs. (I just accept that these children are different from others and should not be compared to anyone else, because their needs are unique.) (IDI- P6)

It felt as though her eyes held an endless ocean of patience and strength vast enough to embrace every child's unique journey without ever comparing them to anyone else.

Environmental Qualities of the Teacher as Factors of Competence in Handling Learners with Special Needs

I was inspired beyond words so deeply that it felt like my heart was set ablaze a thousand times over as I listened to my participant. She shared with a joy that seemed big enough to light up an entire world. As another participant clearly emphasized how grateful she was for a barangay worker who stepped in to help carry their advocacy, she justifies this thru her kind and captivating gestures, saying:

Ang isa namo ka baranggay worker naminaw man siya, pag session na nila sa barangay gi present niya ang katikaran mga sned activities, iyang gi present nga how about every month maghatag ta og 100 pesos so every month naa koy support from the barangay (One of our barangay workers listens to us. During their sessions at the barangay, they presented SNED activities. They suggested that we give 100 pesos every month, so I always have support from the barangay. (IDI -P1)

It was as if that single act of support could echo across endless communities, as they worked hand in hand to present and uplift special need education in the community through the barangay officials, additionally as I looked at the face of another participant, I saw more than just an expression; it was a mirror reflecting a heart devotedly shared her thoughts:

Collaboration mi sa akong sister nga nag handle pud og SNED og ang school nga full support sa mga needs namo. Ang absenteeism pud sa mga bata ma address kay ang full support ang school sa mga panginahanglan sa mga bata sa mga material needed. (I collaborate with my sister, who also handles SNED, and with the school, which fully supports our needs. The children's absenteeism is also addressed because the school fully supports the learners' material needs. (IDI-P2)

In that moment, inspiration bloomed within me like a quiet sunrise, revealing how essential teamwork is in a school. It made me realize that collaboration is the lifeblood of a learning community, where every helping hand becomes a thread that weaves strength and hope together.

4. DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discussed the findings. I specifically presented the future direction and implication of practice of my study.

Personal Qualities Underpinning Teachers' Competence in Inclusive Education

In reviewing my conversation with my study participants, I came to realize that teachers perceive their competence in handling learners with special needs as rooted in personal qualities such as self-awareness, resilience, intrinsic motivation, empathy, patience, positive beliefs in learners, responsiveness, and adaptability, which collectively support effective and inclusive teaching. Based on this realization, I affirm the study of Arias-Pastor et al. (2024), stating that teachers' self-efficacy is influenced by experiential and personal factors, including teaching experience and interaction with learners with disabilities, which strengthen inclusive teaching confidence. Likewise, my finding corroborates with the idea that teachers with strong self-efficacy demonstrate higher motivation, better adaptability, and improved responsiveness to classroom diversity, reinforcing effective inclusive instruction (Savolainen et al. 2022).

In contrary, my claim gave me the reason to contradict the argument of Alnahdi and Schwab (2022), explaining that teachers' self-efficacy for inclusive education is often low or undermined by inadequate training, stress, lack of resources, and systemic constraints, resulting in feelings of incompetence, frustration, and reduced confidence in handling diverse learners, rather than being strengthened by personal qualities such as empathy, resilience, or adaptability.

Teachers Competence in Differentiated and Individualized Instruction for Learners with Special Needs

While going over my conversation with my participants, I found that teachers perceive their competence in handling learners with special needs as reflected in their ability to use flexible, differentiated, and individualized teaching approaches, adapt instruction, and provide remediation to meet each learner's unique needs. As reflected in the conversation, I confirm the study of Wang and Tian (2023), presenting that teachers' professional competence plays a crucial role in their ability to implement differentiated instruction and inclusive teaching practices, as these competencies enable them to adjust strategies and address the diverse learning needs of students effectively. Similarly, my finding goes with the idea that differentiated instruction requires teachers to modify content, teaching methods, and learning processes to accommodate individual differences, ensuring that learners with special needs receive appropriate support tailored to their abilities and challenges (Hameed, et al., 2024). In contrast, my claim gave me the reason to contradict the argument of Smale-Jacobse (2022), explaining that indicating that perceived competence does not always translate into practice due to contextual constraints such as limited resources, time, and training.

Environmental Support Enhances Teachers' Competence in Special Needs Instruction

While examining my interactions with the participants, I became aware that teachers perceive their competence in handling learners with special needs as supported by environmental factors such as collaboration with colleagues, strong institutional support, adequate resources, and a supportive learning environment that enhances engagement and instruction effectiveness. Based on this examined interaction, I verify the study of

Pozas and Letzel, (2023) that teacher collaboration and professional learning communities significantly enhance teachers' ability to implement differentiated instruction, as shared expertise and co-construction of strategies strengthen inclusive teaching practices for diverse learners. In like manner, my finding bears out with the idea that institutional support, including leadership, training, and availability of instructional resources, plays a critical role in developing teachers' competence in addressing learners with special needs by enabling effective adaptation of instruction and fostering inclusive learning environments (Pazey & Van Tassell, 2025). However, my claim gave me the reason to contradict the argument of Martyn et al. (2025), explaining that teachers may still struggle to apply differentiated instruction due to constraints like workload, lack of practical training, and resource limitations, which weaken instructional effectiveness.

Implications for Practice

I strongly encourage education practitioners to allocate sufficient resources toward initiatives that enhance both teacher capacity and inclusive classroom practices. These may include structured activities such as end-of-week reflections to strengthen emotional awareness and compassion in teaching, as well as flexible grouping within differentiated instruction to demonstrate responsive and inclusive practices. The regular conduct of school-based education support team meetings may also help foster a more supportive institutional environment, while participation in inclusive education training workshops can promote continuous professional development.

In addition, engaging in peer mentoring with fellow educators and SPED specialists may help build trust-based professional relationships within the school. Incorporating grounding routines before and after class is likewise important for supporting emotional regulation and maintaining classroom stability. Collectively, these practices can contribute to enhancing teachers' competence and confidence in effectively handling learners with special needs.

Future Direction of my Study

Future research may include multiple linear regression analysis, to determine the factors of teacher competence or forecasting teacher competence using Personal, Behavioral, Environmental, Professional, Relational, and Emotional Regulation factors as predictors. Another important direction is the use of Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), to develop and validate statistical instruments intended for the variables extracted from the themes emerging in this study; utilizing the sub themes as corresponding indicators.

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