

Teachers' professional competence and their coping mechanisms in dealing with instructional stressors in inclusive education in public schools

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the relationship between professional competence and coping mechanisms with instructional stressors among inclusive education teachers in selected elementary schools in the Division of Toledo City, School Year 2025–2026, as basis for a professional development plan. A descriptive-correlational quantitative research design was employed, involving 31 inclusive education teachers as respondents using purposive sampling technique. Data were gathered using a validated 4-point Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from Tenerife et al. (2022) and analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics at a 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that most respondents were aged 31–40, predominantly female, Bachelor's degree holders with MAEd units, and Teacher III with limited training exposure mainly in differentiated instruction. Teachers exhibited a “Very Competent” level of professional competence, “Very High” cognitive and social coping mechanisms, and “High” emotional coping mechanisms. Results further showed a weak positive relationship between professional competence and coping mechanisms, as well as weak associations with most profile variables, while a moderately positive relationship was observed in teaching position and inclusive trainings attended. The study concluded that professional competence alone is not a strong predictor of coping mechanisms, highlighting the importance of contextual factors. It is recommended that a structured teachers' development plan be implemented to enhance competence, strengthen emotional coping, and expand inclusive education training opportunities.

Keywords: Special Education, professional competence, cognitive coping mechanisms, emotional coping mechanisms, social coping mechanisms, Cebu, Philippines.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the shift from segregating learners with special needs to integrating them into general education classrooms has introduced new challenges and increased instructional stress for teachers (Special Education Teachers' Emotional Well-Being and Work-Related Stressors in the School Environment - ProQuest, n.d.).

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Globally, inclusive education is a key priority under the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, particularly through Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes equal access to quality education and holistic learning for all (Adipat & Chotikapanich, 2022). Inclusive education fosters dignity, respect, social equity, and stronger communities by expanding learning opportunities and encouraging tolerance and participation in diverse societies.

Teachers' professional competence is critical in inclusive education, as it directly affects teaching quality, confidence, and responsiveness to diverse learner needs. Alhassan and Sjurso (2025) note that knowledge and attitudes reinforce each other: limited knowledge can create resistance, while deeper understanding strengthens inclusive practices. Olsen (2021) also finds that formal training in special education increases teachers' confidence and reduces uncertainty in inclusive classrooms. Specialized competence is especially important for addressing learner diversity in areas such as language development, reading (Moats, 2014), and emotional and behavioral difficulties (Hind, Larkin, and Dunn, 2019).

Special needs educators face significant challenges in developing instructional materials, managing classrooms, and accessing resources. These difficulties are intensified by inadequate administrative support and limited resources, making effective coping mechanisms essential for managing classroom complexities, adapting to policy changes, and supporting the well-being of students and teachers (Kasim & Mohan Rathakrishnan, 2025). Burnout and instructional stress are common, often due to physical exhaustion and role conflicts. Teachers employ coping strategies such as mindfulness, dynamic instructional methods, time management, and social or spiritual engagement to maintain resilience.

In the United States, about 30% of preschool teachers leave their jobs, more than four times the average 7% turnover (Kim et al., 2020). Teachers encounter about 5.2 stressful work situations per week (Sneyers et al., 2016). Roughly 51% of teachers reported feeling extremely stressed on multiple days during the workweek (Williams & Dikes, 2015). Teachers' instructional stress can be associated with a variety of factors, including student classroom behaviors, work relationships with colleagues, and unclear job expectations (Edward et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2025; Sneyers et al., 2016).

In the Philippines, inclusive education is strengthened through the Department of Education's (DepEd) mandate to protect every Filipino's right to quality and accessible education at all levels, as reflected in DepEd Order No. 23, s. In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) strengthens inclusive education through policies such as DepEd Order No. 23, s. 2022, which supports learners with special needs in acquiring skills for lifelong development (Hernando-Malipot, 2022). However, integrating learners with diverse needs into regular classrooms presents challenges, especially in secondary schools where few teachers have specialized training. Teachers without a special education background often face instructional stress, burnout, and work-related pressure due to behavioral issues, lack of administrative support, increased demands, heavy workloads, and challenging professional relationships (Amistad & Muller, 2020; Sanchez, 2019). Many Filipino teachers also doubt their competence in managing inclusive classrooms, particularly when supporting learners with cognitive difficulties such as dyscalculia, slow reading, poor spelling, and low academic performance. Additionally, many public schools in both rural and urban areas lack adequate resources to support the diverse needs of learners (Muega, 2019; Amistad & Muller, 2020). Many of these learners came from inclusive education programs and are now mainstreamed into general classroom settings, requiring regular teachers to provide more individualized instruction and prepare multiple lessons to address diverse learning needs. This situation increases teachers' workload and instructional stress, reflecting the actual experiences of SPED and mainstream teachers in the Philippines, who must balance inclusive teaching

responsibilities with ensuring that learners with special educational needs receive appropriate academic support.

These challenges place significant instructional demands on teachers, especially those working with learners with special educational needs, leading to increased classroom and instructional stress. Although teacher burnout has been studied, there is a lack of local research examining the relationship between the professional competence of Special Education (SPED) teachers and their coping mechanisms in response to instructional stressors in selected schools in the Division of Toledo City for the 2025–2026 school year.

Statement of the problem

This study examined the relationship between professional competence and coping with instructional stressors among special education teachers in selected elementary schools in the Division of Toledo City for School Year 2025–2026, as basis for a professional development plan.

Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the demographic profiles of the respondents in terms of age and gender, highest educational attainment, field of specialization, years of teaching, and inclusive trainings and seminars attended?
2. What is the level of professional competence among the respondents in handling inclusive education?
3. What is the level of coping mechanisms of the respondents on instructional stressors in terms of cognitive coping mechanisms, social coping mechanisms, and emotional coping mechanisms?
4. Is there a significant relationship between the level of professional competence and coping with instructional stressors among special education teachers?
5. Is there a significant relationship between the level of professional competence and the level of coping mechanisms of the respondents on instructional stressors among special education teachers when grouped according to demographic profile?
6. Based on the findings, what professional development plan can be proposed?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study used a descriptive-correlational research design to identify relationships between variables without manipulation, as explained by Seeram (2019). This method is appropriate for examining the professional competence of special education teachers and their coping mechanisms in response to instructional stressors at selected elementary schools in the Division of Toledo City during School Year 2025–2026 (Aithor, 2024). The researcher employed a design to determine the level of professional competence among SPED teachers and how they cope with instructional stressors in an inclusive teaching environment.

Locale of the study

This study was conducted at four selected schools in the Division of Toledo City: Bato Elementary School, Biga Elementary School, Magdugo Elementary School, and South City Central School. Each school enrolls learners with special needs at every grade level. The

schools are situated in Toledo City which are accessible area within the division and serves learners with special needs through inclusive education and may offer SPED support services.

Respondents of the study

The study's respondents were 31 education teachers from the selected schools during the School Year 2025-2026. These teachers managed heterogeneous classrooms with students of varying academic achievement, learning needs, cultural backgrounds, and behavioral patterns.

Selection and description of respondent

Purposive sampling was used to select respondents, focusing on teachers experienced in managing learners with special needs in selected schools. This approach ensured that data collected would be meaningful and accurate for the study's findings.

Data gathering instruments

The research instrument for data collection was a modified survey questionnaire, developed by Alegarbes (2022), that incorporated elements from Tenerife et al. (2022) to assess teachers' competence and coping mechanisms in response to instructional stressors.

It consists of three parts, the first part presents the respondents' demographic profile, including gender, age, highest educational attainment, years of service, and training and seminars attended on inclusive education. The second part contains 15 affirmative statements assessing the professional competence of special education teachers. And lastly, the part III comprises 25 statements that measure teachers' coping mechanisms for instructional stressors in inclusive education.

Data gathering procedure

The data collection process consisted of three stages: preliminary, data gathering, and post-data gathering. Each phase ensured the research was conducted ethically, systematically, and efficiently.

In the preliminary stage, the researcher secured approval from the relevant authorities, including the school heads of Bato Elementary School, Biga Elementary School, Magdugo Elementary School, and South City Central School, as well as the division office, through formal transmittal letters. This stage also involved preparing research instruments, particularly the questionnaire, which was validated by field experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for the target respondents. Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from all respondents in selected schools, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose, confidentiality procedures, and the voluntary nature of participation.

In the data gathering stage, the researcher distributed the google forms survey link to respondents, allowing them sufficient time to complete it at their convenience. The completed surveys were collected with respondents' permission.

Lastly, the post-data gathering stage, the respondents completed the questionnaires were reviewed for completeness and systematically organized. Responses were tabulated and analyzed statistically to identify patterns, trends, and relationships among variables. Findings and recommendations were then developed, forming the basis for a targeted school-based intervention plan to enhance teachers' efficacy in implementing IEPs across schools.

Data analysis procedure

The data collected through the survey questionnaire was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to ensure accurate interpretation of the results. The level of significance was set at 0.05 to determine whether the observed relationships are statistically meaningful. This study uses Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to test whether there were significant differences in professional competence and coping mechanisms in response to instructional stressors across demographic groups. Frequency, percentages weighted mean, standard deviation, and Pearson's r were computed to assess the relationships among respondents' profiles, professional competence, and coping mechanisms.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles to protect the rights and welfare of all respondents. Prior to data collection, informed and voluntary consent was obtained from all participants. Each potential respondent received a consent form written in accessible language that detailed the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of all information provided.

The anonymity of respondents was maintained by omitting names from survey questionnaires, thereby preventing personal identification of responses. All data were treated with strict confidentiality, used exclusively for academic research, and stored securely with access restricted to the researcher.

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty or impact on their professional standing or their child's educational status. The researcher ensured that the study design and instruments posed no physical or psychological harm.

The Data Privacy Act of 2012, as stated in Republic Act No. 10173, was employed in this study. All data gathered was processed and stored solely for the declared research objectives. Electronic files were password-protected, and physical documents will be kept in a secure location. All data was disposed of securely after the mandated retention period.

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the school administration of selected schools in the Division of Toledo City and other relevant authorities before contacting potential participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved thirty-one (31) inclusive education teachers as respondents, drawn through a descriptive-correlational research design that employed a survey questionnaire as the primary data-gathering instrument. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, weighted mean, and standard deviation, as well as inferential statistics including Pearson correlation and its corresponding p -values to determine the significance of relationships among variables. The following discussion is grounded entirely on the data gathered from the respondents and is interpreted in direct relation to the objectives of the study, which sought to determine the demographic profile of inclusive teachers, their level of professional competence, their level of coping mechanisms toward instructional stressors, and the significant relationship between professional competence and coping mechanisms when taken as a whole and when grouped according to profile variables.

Demographic profile of the respondents

The age distribution and gender of inclusive teachers are essential for understanding their professional competence and coping mechanisms for instructional stressors, which can broadly impact professional success. The results revealed that the majority of the respondents are female, comprising 29 out of 31 respondents or 93.54%, while only 2 respondents or 6.46% are male. This indicates that teaching in the selected schools is predominantly occupied by female teachers, which is commonly observed in the teaching profession. In terms of age, the majority of the respondents belong to the 31–40 years old group, with 12 (38.71%) respondents. This is followed by the 26–30 years old group with 8 (25.81%), and the 41–50 years old group with 7 (22.58%). These findings suggest that most of the respondents are within the early to middle stages of their professional careers, indicating a relatively active and productive workforce in the special education field. The findings align with the study of Bukvic (2014), which shows that middle-aged teachers experience higher professional competence and are more positive about teaching students with special needs, and that some mature teachers have positive attitudes toward inclusive education. According to Sharma et al. (2021), the demographic profile of teachers' professional competence in inclusive education settings may affect the implementation of inclusive education to varying degrees. However, Sabanal et al. (2025) found that inclusive teachers' age and gender showed weak significant correlations to professional competence.

With respect to educational attainment, the results show that the majority of the respondents have advanced educational qualifications. Specifically, 15 (48.39%) inclusive teachers have earned a master's degree, while 45.16%, or 14 inclusive teachers, hold a bachelor's degree with master's units. In addition, 2 (6.45%) inclusive teachers have completed a doctorate degree. These findings indicate that all respondents have pursued graduate studies, reflecting a strong commitment to professional growth and continuous learning among special education teachers. The high percentage of inclusive education teachers with graduate-level education suggests that the teachers possess enhanced knowledge, pedagogical skills, and professional expertise necessary for addressing the needs of learners in special education settings. These results are consistent with Bermudo et al. (2025), who found that educational attainment had a positive effect, while longer teaching experience and older age were associated with lower attitudes and practices. Additionally, higher educational attainment and work experience are associated with greater professional competence among teachers (Abun et al., 2021). Burger et al. (2020) also identified significant differences in coping mechanisms in response to instructional stressors by educational attainment and work experience.

Inclusive teachers' specialization demonstrates stronger psycho-pedagogical and methodological competencies, including differentiated instruction, behavior management, and adapting learning environments to diverse needs, which are seen as core to inclusive competence. The results revealed that the majority of the inclusive education teachers specialize in General Education, with 12 teachers (38.71%). This is followed by Preschool Education or Early Childhood Education with 10 respondents or 32.26%, and Special Education (SPED) with 8 respondents or 25.81%, while only 1 teacher, comprising 3.22%, belongs to other fields of specialization. These findings indicate that the respondents come from diverse educational backgrounds, with many teachers trained in areas closely related to child development and inclusive education. Furthermore, the findings imply that having relevant specialization plays a significant role in reducing difficulties in coping with instructional stressors, as specialized training equips teachers with practical strategies, emotional preparedness, and problem-solving skills that help lessen stress and improve teaching effectiveness. These results are similar to the observation that teachers whose specialization is not directly related to SPED may experience greater challenges in adjusting to

the complex demands of inclusive and special education classrooms (Crispel, 2019). The varied fields of specialization among teachers highlight the importance of specialization in strengthening professional competence and enhancing teachers' capacity to cope with instructional stressors effectively (Kazachiner, 2020). Inclusive education places high demands on teachers' specialized competence and their ability to manage stress in diverse classrooms, and research shows that field-specific preparation in inclusive education strengthens teachers' professional skills and confidence to respond to learners with disabilities, while targeted stress-management supports their well-being and effectiveness (Kazachiner, 2020). Together, these forms of specialization help teachers sustain inclusive practice despite complex instructional challenges.

In terms of teaching experience, the results revealed that the majority of the respondents have been teaching for 6–10 years, with 10 respondents (32.26%). Nine respondents (29.03%) have 11–20 years of teaching experience, six (19.35%) have taught for 3–5 years, and five (16.13%) have 21 or more years of experience. Only 1 respondent (3.23%) belongs to the 0–2 years category. These findings indicate that the majority of the respondents have considerable teaching experience, suggesting a workforce composed largely of mid-career and experienced educators. The results imply that years of service contribute significantly to the development of professional competence among teachers, as longer teaching experience allows educators to enhance their instructional strategies, classroom management skills, communication abilities, and understanding of diverse learner needs. These results are consistent with Pan and Cheng (2023), who found that teachers' professional competence improves with years of service in the department. Teaching experience enables educators to share insights, address challenges, and collaboratively develop strategies for managing instructional stressors in inclusive classrooms. Similarly, Buric (2020) reported that experienced teachers demonstrate higher self-efficacy and more positive attitudes toward teaching students with special needs, and that many mature teachers support inclusive education.

The teachers' position as an educator affects their competence in facilitating learning and supporting socio-emotional development, as well as their professional competence in fostering child development. The results reveal that the majority of the teacher respondents hold the position of Teacher III, comprising 11 respondents or 35.48%. This is followed by respondents classified under other teaching-related positions, comprising 10 respondents (32.26%), 8 respondents (25.81%) who are Master Teachers, and only 2 respondents (6.45%) who are Teacher I. These findings indicate that most of the respondents occupy higher teaching positions, suggesting that many have already gained substantial professional experience and have met the qualifications required for career advancement. As a result, teachers in higher positions are likely to have stronger pedagogical expertise and greater confidence in handling the complex demands of special education teaching. These findings align with Demchenko et al. (2021), who identified a positive relationship between teachers' competencies for inclusive teaching, professional competencies, personality traits, and demographic factors such as teaching experience and position. It suggests that higher teaching positions may contribute to reducing difficulties in coping with instructional stressors, as teachers who have advanced in rank often develop better coping strategies, emotional resilience, and problem-solving skills through years of professional practice and exposure to various educational challenges (Majoko, 2019). Master Teachers, in particular, may be more capable of managing workload demands, learner diversity, and instructional pressures due to their leadership roles and broader professional experiences.

With regard to the various trainings and seminars attended, which is a significant factor in understanding teachers' professional competence and their coping mechanisms to

instructional stressors in implementing inclusive education for learners with special needs, the data reveal that the most commonly attended training is Differentiated Instruction Training, with 12 responses or 28.57%. This is followed by SPED Basic Training with 8 responses or 19.05%. Assessment Accommodation Training and other related trainings both obtained 7 responses or 16.67%, while Behavior Management Training accounted for 6 responses or 14.29%. Meanwhile, only 2 responses, or 4.76%, indicated that no inclusive training or seminar had been attended. The total frequency of 42 suggests that some respondents attended more than one training or seminar related to inclusive education practices. These findings imply that the majority of the respondents actively participate in professional development activities related to inclusive education. Trainings such as differentiated instruction, behavior management, and assessment accommodation provide teachers with essential competencies in addressing diverse learner needs, adapting instructional strategies, and creating inclusive classroom environments. These findings are consistent with Joyno (2025), indicating that teaching and learning outcomes for students with special needs improve when educators receive targeted training for specific disabilities, underscoring the value of continuous professional development through seminars, workshops, and specialized training in special education. Additionally, advanced academic training and specialization are associated with decreased vulnerability to stress, particularly lower dependence (Candeias et al., 2021). Educators who are more susceptible to instructional stressors are at increased risk of burnout, fatigue, and exhaustion, and consequently, specialized training should also include strategies for identifying and managing stress factors.

Level of professional competence among the respondents in handling inclusive education

Professional competence in inclusive education in Philippine public schools rests on teachers' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and support systems needed to teach learners with disabilities and diverse needs in regular classrooms. Inclusive education places high demands on teachers' professional competence and their ability to manage instructional stressors in diverse classrooms, and research shows that field-specific preparation in special or inclusive education strengthens teachers' professional skills and confidence to respond to learners with disabilities, while targeted stress-management supports their well-being and effectiveness (Vantieghem et al., 2023).

The results revealed an overall average weighted mean of 3.52, interpreted as Very Competent, indicating that the respondents generally possess a high level of competence in managing inclusive classrooms and addressing the needs of learners with special educational needs. This finding indicates that teachers possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective inclusive education. The indicator "Providing atmosphere that is friendly to both learners with and without special needs" achieved the highest mean score, with a weighted mean of 3.68 and a standard deviation of 0.48, reflecting a Very Competent rating. This was followed by "Providing interventions of any learner with special needs," "Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of learners with special needs," "Collaborating strategies and techniques in handling learners with special needs with my colleagues," and "Coordinating with well-trained teachers with regards to the strategies I apply inside the classroom to address the needs of the learners," all with a weighted mean of 3.65 and interpreted as Very Competent. These findings imply that the respondents highly value creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment, collaboration with colleagues, and individualized interventions for learners with special needs. Such competencies are important because they help foster learner participation, improve academic and social development, and ensure that students with learning needs receive appropriate support and attention inside the classroom.

The indicators with the lowest mean scores are "Implementing the process on how to handle a class catering to learners with special needs" (mean: 3.23, SD: 0.80, Competent), "Using assistive technology for learners with special needs" (mean: 3.26, SD: 0.73, Very Competent), and "Using appropriate assessment tools for learners with special needs" (mean: 3.32, SD: 0.83, Very Competent). Although these indicators still fall within the competent to very competent level, the comparatively lower scores suggest that teachers may experience challenges in technical and specialized aspects of inclusive instruction, particularly in classroom implementation, technology integration, and assessment practices. These areas are critical in inclusive education because effective use of assistive technology and appropriate assessment tools can significantly improve learners' participation, performance, and individualized support.

These findings imply that continuous professional development and specialized training are necessary to further strengthen teachers' competencies in these areas. Enhancing teachers' skills in instructional implementation, assistive technology, and learner assessment can help improve the quality of inclusive education and better address the diverse needs of students with learning difficulties. Overall, the high level of professional competence demonstrated by the respondents reflects their commitment to inclusive teaching practices, which positively contributes to creating supportive, learner-centered, and equitable educational environments for all students. Various studies indicate that inclusive education teachers are competent in knowledge and skills and demonstrate strong attitudes toward inclusion, regularly applying inclusive strategies (Bermudo et al., 2025). Inclusive education teachers are often highly competent because they possess a broad set of professional, pedagogical, and emotional skills specifically geared toward meeting diverse learners' needs. Studies show that teacher competence in inclusive settings is typically high, especially in areas such as classroom management, collaboration, and differentiated teaching, which are critical for supporting students with and without disabilities together in one classroom (Hermanto and Suparno, 2026). Reviews and empirical work highlight that these teachers can adapt curricula, modify teaching strategies, and manage behavior in ways that create supportive, flexible learning environments for all learners (Mangope and Major, 2023). Their competence is further reinforced by motivation and self-efficacy, as teachers who feel confident and motivated show stronger skills and more effective inclusive practices (Cañoso, 2025). However, many still feel only moderately prepared, especially for individualized education plans and assistive technologies, indicating that positive dispositions create a strong foundation but are not sufficient without deeper pedagogical skills and support.

Level of coping mechanisms of the respondents on instructional stressors

Inclusive education teachers commonly experience high instructional stress, but many use a mix of cognitive, social, and emotional coping strategies to manage stress and prevent burnout.

Cognitive coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms are essential in managing instructional stress experienced by special education teachers, who often face high workloads, diverse learner needs, and behavioral challenges. Research across several countries shows that effective coping is closely linked to better well-being and job satisfaction among teachers. Results show an overall average weighted mean of 3.42, classified as Very High, suggesting that respondents often use

positive thinking, problem-solving, and mental coping strategies to manage instructional stressors in inclusive classrooms. This suggests that the teachers possess strong cognitive coping abilities that help them remain focused, resilient, and adaptive in handling the challenges associated with teaching learners with diverse educational needs. "Try to look on the bright side of things" received the highest mean score, with a weighted mean of 3.71 and a standard deviation of 0.46, rated as Very High. "Cope with different solutions on difficult issues" followed with a mean of 3.65 and a standard deviation of 0.49, while "Assure yourself that things will get better" had a mean of 3.58 and a standard deviation of 0.50, both also rated as Very High. These findings imply that the respondents strongly rely on optimism, problem-solving, and positive self-assurance when dealing with instructional stressors, and such cognitive coping mechanisms are important because they enable teachers to maintain emotional stability, improve decision-making, and sustain motivation despite the demands of inclusive education.

The indicators with the lowest mean scores were "Try to get the child to a special classroom" (weighted mean: 2.90, standard deviation: 0.70, interpreted as High) and "Enlist the support of the other children" (weighted mean: 3.23, standard deviation: 0.72, interpreted as High). These two indicators garnered only a High rating, indicating that while teachers demonstrate competence by encouraging peer support and recommending specialized classroom placement when appropriate, these practices may not be implemented consistently or comprehensively across all situations. This suggests that teachers possess sound professional competence in addressing diverse learners' needs but still require further capacity-building and confidence in applying more inclusive and collaborative intervention strategies, and that the respondents are less likely to rely on transferring learners to separate classrooms or avoiding deeper reflection on problems as coping strategies. These results align with the idea that cognitive coping is closely linked to teachers' professional competence and resilience in inclusive educational settings. Rismawati et al. (2025) found that coping strategies influence several aspects of professional competence, as problem-focused coping increases compassion satisfaction and reduces burnout, while avoidant coping raises secondary traumatic stress, indicating that adaptive cognitive coping helps teachers manage the emotional and instructional demands of special education. Similarly, Paquette and Rieg (2016) identified effective time management and scheduled rest periods as common coping strategies that reduce stress and prevent burnout among special education teachers.

Social coping mechanisms

Social support is one of the most consistently reported coping resources for inclusive education teachers. Teachers often share concerns with colleagues, seek advice, and rely on mentoring relationships to manage behavioral and instructional stressors (Issakah, 2021). The overall weighted mean of 3.28, rated Very High, shows that respondents frequently seek support from school leaders, parents, colleagues, specialists, and personal networks, suggesting that teachers actively rely on interpersonal relationships and professional collaboration as key strategies in managing instructional stressors in inclusive education settings. Among the indicators, "Discuss the situation with the child's parents" received the highest mean score of 3.55 with a standard deviation of 0.51, rated Very High. This was followed by "Seek help from teachers" (mean 3.52, SD 0.51) and "Discuss the situation with a specialist" (mean 3.48, SD 0.51), both also rated Very High. These findings imply that teachers highly value collaboration and open communication with key stakeholders in addressing instructional stressors, as engaging parents, colleagues, and specialists is essential in inclusive education because it promotes shared responsibility, enhances problem-solving, and ensures that learners with special needs receive coordinated support. Such collaborative practices also strengthen

teachers' professional competence and reduce feelings of isolation in handling challenging classroom situations.

"Keeping others from knowing how bad things really are" received the lowest mean score (mean = 2.42, SD = 0.81), classified as Low. Both "Increase the number of support personnel to visit your class" (mean = 3.10, SD = 0.47) and "Discuss the situation with colleagues" (mean = 3.23, SD = 0.56) were classified as High. These results suggest that respondents are least likely to conceal their instructional difficulties, indicating openness in seeking help rather than withholding concerns. However, the relatively lower scores in increasing support personnel and discussing issues with colleagues may reflect limitations in available institutional support systems or time constraints that hinder regular collaboration. The findings imply that strong social coping mechanisms are vital in enhancing teachers' resilience and effectiveness in inclusive education, and that by actively seeking support from parents, colleagues, and specialists, teachers are better able to address learners' diverse needs, manage classroom challenges, and reduce instructional stress. Strengthening school-based collaboration, improving access to support personnel, and fostering a culture of openness can further enhance teachers' coping capacity. Administrative support, such as availability, constructive feedback, and encouragement for professional growth, also functions as a crucial coping resource, reducing stress and sustaining job satisfaction (Sattar et al., 2022). Social coping is central for inclusive education teachers managing learners with special needs, as teachers frequently seek collegial support by sharing concerns with co-workers, collaborating on behavior management, and creating mentorship or collegial networks, which help them cope with classroom demands and isolation (Dotimas, 2023; Issakah et al., 2021).

Emotional coping mechanisms

Emotional coping mechanisms directly influence the well-being and instructional effectiveness of inclusive education teachers. Teachers who develop healthy emotional coping strategies are better equipped to handle the complexities of inclusive classrooms, sustain their motivation, and provide quality support to learners with special educational needs. The overall weighted mean of 2.88, rated as High, indicates that teachers use emotional strategies to manage classroom challenges with moderate frequency. The highest means were for "Hope that the situation will get better soon" (mean = 3.32, SD = 0.48), "Write down your feelings" (mean = 3.16, SD = 0.52), and "Share your feelings with children in class" (mean = 2.81, SD = 0.75), all rated as High. These findings suggest that teachers frequently rely on reflective and optimistic emotional strategies to cope with instructional stressors, as writing down feelings and maintaining hope reflect positive emotional regulation, which is important in reducing stress and maintaining professional composure.

The lowest mean scores were recorded for "Try to keep your feelings to yourself" (mean: 2.45, SD: 0.72, interpreted as Low) and "Apply for sick or vacation leave" (mean: 2.65, SD: 0.88, interpreted as High). These results indicate that respondents prefer to express their emotions rather than suppress them. The findings imply that emotional coping mechanisms play a significant role in how inclusive education teachers manage stress related to classroom demands. While positive strategies such as reflection and maintaining hope contribute to emotional resilience, the presence of higher stress-related responses such as taking leave highlights the need for institutional support systems. Strengthening emotional support programs, wellness initiatives, and counseling services within schools can help teachers better regulate emotions and sustain their well-being. Disruptive and harmful student behaviors are major sources of stress among teachers, reinforcing the need for effective emotional coping

strategies in classroom management (Amistad and Muller, 2020). In addition, Rismawati et al. (2025) noted that emotion-focused coping enhances compassion satisfaction and reduces burnout, while avoidant coping increases secondary traumatic stress.

Test of significant relationship between professional competence and coping with instructional stressors among inclusive education teachers

Inclusive teachers' professional competence shapes how they cope with instructional stressors in inclusive classrooms. Teachers who are more competent are better equipped to apply appropriate instructional strategies, manage classroom behavior, and adapt teaching approaches, thereby reducing stressors and enhancing their ability to cope with instructional demands. The results show a correlation value of 0.26, indicating a weak positive relationship between the two variables. This means that as professional competence increases, coping mechanisms for instructional stressors also tend to increase, although the relationship is relatively weak. The p-value of 0.000, which is less than the level of significance, led to the rejection of the null hypothesis (HO1), indicating that there is a statistically significant relationship between professional competence and coping with instructional stressors.

These findings suggest that professional competence significantly influences how teachers manage instructional stressors in inclusive education settings. Although the relationship is weak, the positive direction suggests that teachers who demonstrate higher levels of competence in handling inclusive education tasks are also more likely to employ effective coping strategies when dealing with classroom challenges. This highlights that competence gained through training, experience, and specialization contributes to better psychological and instructional preparedness in managing diverse learners with special needs. This significant relationship underscores the need to strengthen both professional competence and coping mechanisms among inclusive education teachers, as greater competence enables teachers to use effective instructional strategies, manage classroom behavior, and adapt their teaching, which reduces stress and improves their ability to meet instructional demands. Likewise, effective coping mechanisms support teachers in maintaining emotional stability, resilience, and motivation, which are essential in sustaining inclusive classroom practices. For students with learning needs, this translates to more consistent instructional support, improved learning experiences, and a more stable and responsive learning environment. Overall, the findings underscore the interconnected role of professional competence and coping mechanisms in promoting effective inclusive education practice.

Test of significant relationship between professional competence and coping with instructional stressors when grouped according to the profile of the respondents

Inclusive teachers show strong commitment and generally positive attitudes toward inclusive education, but their professional competence is constrained by gaps in specialized knowledge, training, and systemic support. Clear competency standards, sustained professional development, and better-resourced, collaborative school environments are consistently highlighted as essential to strengthening inclusive practice across public schools in the Philippines, and eventually to reducing instructional stressors and boosting teachers' coping mechanisms (Olayvar, 2022).

The results present the significant relationship between the profile variables of the respondents and their professional competence and coping mechanisms toward instructional stressors among inclusive education teachers. Results revealed that all profile variables obtained p-values lower than the 0.05 level of significance, indicating that the relationships are statistically significant. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected in all variables. In terms of

professional competence, trainings and seminars attended obtained the highest correlation value ($r = 0.41$), interpreted as a moderate positive correlation, followed by teaching position ($r = 0.34$). This indicates that teachers who actively participate in professional development activities and those occupying higher teaching positions tend to demonstrate greater competence in inclusive education. Meanwhile, age, gender, highest educational attainment, and years of service showed weak positive correlations, suggesting that these variables still contribute to teachers' professional competence, although to a lesser degree.

In terms of the inclusive education teachers' coping mechanisms toward instructional stressors, trainings and seminars attended also obtained the highest correlation ($r = 0.39$), followed by teaching position ($r = 0.31$), both interpreted as moderate positive correlations. This implies that teachers who attend more trainings and seminars are better equipped with strategies and skills in managing instructional stressors encountered in inclusive classrooms, and teachers with higher positions may also possess stronger coping abilities due to greater professional exposure and experience. These findings further imply that professional competence and coping mechanisms are influenced by both personal and professional characteristics of teachers. The results align with the study of Candeias et al. (2020), in which teachers with more academic and professional training, including specialization in special education, show less vulnerability to stress, greater resilience, and better professional performance, suggesting that competence buffers the impact of new inclusive demands. Preparedness for inclusive education is strongly and positively related to teachers' coping mechanisms, as highly prepared non-SPED teachers report high use of professional coping strategies such as collaboration, continuous learning, and seeking support, which help them navigate diverse instructional challenges (Yburan and Tantiado, 2025). Teachers' professional competence and their coping strategies also predict burnout, as teachers who use more effective interpersonal coping, such as conflict reduction and relationship-building, experience fewer burnout symptoms, underlining the competence-coping link in managing stressful interactions in inclusive schools (Pavlidou et al., 2020).

Taken together, the findings of this study demonstrate that the thirty-one (31) inclusive education teacher-respondents are predominantly female, within the early to middle stages of their careers, highly educated, experienced, and actively engaged in professional development, and that these demographic characteristics converge to shape both their professional competence and their coping mechanisms toward instructional stressors. The respondents exhibited a Very Competent overall level of professional competence, with an average weighted mean of 3.52, particularly excelling in fostering inclusive classroom atmospheres and collaborative intervention, while showing relatively lower, though still competent, performance in technical areas such as assistive technology use and assessment. Their coping mechanisms were strongest in the cognitive domain, with an overall weighted mean of 3.42 interpreted as Very High, followed by social coping at 3.28, also Very High, and emotional coping at 2.88, interpreted as High, revealing a general reliance on optimism, problem-solving, and collaborative help-seeking over emotional suppression or avoidance. The statistically significant, though weak, positive correlation of 0.26 between professional competence and coping mechanisms, together with the significant moderate correlations associated with training participation and teaching position, affirm that professional growth and coping capacity are interdependent and are further shaped by demographic and professional profile variables. These results directly address the objectives of the study by establishing empirical evidence of the profile, competence level, coping level, and the interrelationship among these constructs among inclusive education teachers. The findings contribute to the broader field of inclusive education by underscoring the critical role of continuous professional development,

specialized training, and institutional support systems in simultaneously strengthening teacher competence and resilience against instructional stressors. These insights provide a substantive empirical foundation for the recommendations and conclusions to be presented in the succeeding chapter, particularly with regard to the design of targeted training programs, the enhancement of institutional support mechanisms, and the formulation of policies that promote sustainable and effective inclusive education practice.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that inclusive education teachers' professional competence and coping mechanisms are closely linked in managing instructional stressors. They also show that these teachers are effective and adaptable when addressing the needs of students with special needs. The weak positive relationship between competence, coping mechanisms, and profile variables suggests that personal and professional characteristics slightly influence teachers' ability to manage stress, and that teaching position and inclusive trainings attended highlight the importance of professional development and contextual support in strengthening teachers' competence and coping capacities for effective inclusive education practices, which is aligned with the principles of the Theory of Coping-Competence-Context or the 3C Theory. Based on the findings and conclusions, the researcher presents the following recommendation: division and regional officials, together with school principals, should fully support the implementation of the proposed professional development plan by providing continuous training, technical assistance, funding, and monitoring programs that enhance inclusive education teachers' professional competence and coping mechanisms in managing instructional stressors.

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