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Bridging the gap: A needs assessment of elementary teachers' special education competencies for inclusive education

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the Special Education competencies and professional development needs of elementary teachers at Biga Elementary School as a basis for developing a Special Education Competency Enhancement Program. Specifically, it focused on three competency domains: early recognition of learner support needs, school-based referral and collaboration, and positive behavior support. The study employed quantitative descriptive survey research design anchored on Borich's Needs Assessment Model. The respondents consisted of the elementary teachers of Biga Elementary School who were selected through total enumeration. Data were gathered using a researcher-developed structured questionnaire that assessed the respondents' profile, perceived importance and self-rated competence in the identified Special Education competencies, and preferred Learning Action Cell (LAC) session arrangements. The data were analyzed using frequency count, percentage, weighted mean, Mean Weighted Discrepancy Score (MWDS), and rank. The MWDS determined the discrepancy between the perceived importance of each competency and teachers' self-rated competence and established the relative priority of their training needs. Findings served as the basis for identifying priority competency areas and preferred professional learning arrangements. Based on the identified needs, a Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers was developed to strengthen teachers' capacity to recognize learner support needs, participate effectively in school-based referral and collaboration, and apply positive behavior support strategies. The program was limited to development and was not implemented or evaluated within the scope of the study. The study provides a practical basis for responsive teacher professional development and strengthening inclusive education practices at Biga Elementary School.

Keywords: Special Education competencies, inclusive education, needs assessment, Borich's Needs Assessment Model, descriptive survey, teacher professional development.

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a global priority that promotes equitable access to quality education for all learners, including those with disabilities and diverse learning needs. In the Philippines, this commitment has been strengthened through the enactment of Republic Act No. 11650, or the Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities in Support of Inclusive Education Act, which mandates the implementation of inclusive education and the provision of appropriate support services to learners with disabilities (Republic Act No. 11650, 2022). In support of this law, the Department of Education (DepEd) has continuously developed policies and programs that encourage schools to establish inclusive learning environments where learners, regardless of ability or disability, can participate meaningfully in the educational process.

The successful implementation of inclusive education, however, depends not only on the existence of policies but also on the capacity of teachers to translate these policies into effective classroom practices. Elementary teachers are expected to address increasingly diverse learning needs through appropriate instructional strategies, classroom management, assessment accommodations, behavior management, individualized educational planning, and collaboration with parents, special education professionals, and other stakeholders. However, the implementation of inclusive education may be challenging when teachers have limited preparation, insufficient training, or inadequate confidence in addressing the needs of learners with disabilities. Thus, assessing teachers' competencies is essential in determining whether they are adequately prepared to fulfill their responsibilities in inclusive classrooms. Studies have emphasized that teacher competence and preparedness are critical to the quality and sustainability of inclusive education (Florian & Camedda, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022).

In the Philippine context, the need for competent teachers is reinforced by DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021, or the Policy Guidelines on the Provision of Educational Programs and Services for Learners with Disabilities in the K to 12 Basic Education Program. The policy establishes guidelines for providing educational programs and services to learners with disabilities and recognizes the importance of teacher competence, collaboration, and continuous professional development in implementing inclusive education. Similarly, DepEd Order No. 23, s. 2022, or the Child Find Policy for Learners with Disabilities Towards Inclusive Education, emphasizes the role of schools and teachers in the early identification, assessment, and provision of appropriate support to learners with disabilities. These policies demonstrate that teachers are not merely implementers of inclusive education but are central to identifying learning barriers, adapting instruction, and facilitating appropriate interventions. Further, international research demonstrates the importance of strengthening teacher competencies. UNESCO (2020) emphasized that teachers need continuous professional learning to effectively respond to learner diversity and promote equitable educational outcomes.

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2022) likewise identified teacher preparedness as an important factor influencing the quality of inclusive classroom practices. Sharma et al. (2022) reported that sustained professional development can improve teachers' confidence, attitudes, and instructional practices in working with learners with special educational needs. Ainscow (2020) also emphasized that inclusive education reforms become sustainable when teachers are equipped with the competencies needed to identify and remove barriers to learning and participation.

Despite these findings, a significant gap remains in the existing body of research. Many studies concerning inclusive education have primarily examined teachers' attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, self-efficacy, or general challenges in implementing inclusion. While these studies provide important information about teachers' experiences, they do not

necessarily establish which specific special education competencies teachers possess, which competencies remain insufficient, and which areas require immediate professional development. Consequently, positive attitudes toward inclusion or general perceptions of preparedness cannot, by themselves, establish whether teachers have the practical competencies necessary to implement inclusive education effectively.

This gap is particularly important at the elementary level, where teachers often serve as the primary classroom teachers responsible for addressing diverse learning needs. Although existing research has provided evidence regarding teacher preparedness and challenges, fewer studies have comprehensively examined elementary teachers' competencies across several essential areas of special education practice and subsequently translated identified competency gaps into specific professional development needs. In addition, existing Philippine studies have often focused on particular groups of teachers, selected competency areas, or general perceptions of inclusive education rather than providing a systematic needs assessment that can directly guide a competency-based intervention.

Evidence from Philippine research further supports the need to address this gap. De Arao and Fontanilla (2024), for instance, found that although SPED teachers demonstrated competence in several instructional areas, opportunities for improvement remained in areas such as vocational, transition, and specialized instructional competencies. Such findings demonstrate that teacher competency is not a single, uniform construct; rather, teachers may demonstrate strengths in some areas while requiring substantial support in others. However, findings from studies involving SPED teachers cannot automatically be generalized to regular elementary teachers who may be implementing inclusive education in mainstream classrooms. This distinction creates a need for research that specifically examines the competencies and professional development needs of elementary teachers who are expected to accommodate learners with diverse educational needs within regular classroom settings.

Moreover, what is still lacking is a clear connection between competency assessment and professional development planning. Identifying that teachers experience difficulties in inclusive education is insufficient if the specific competency areas responsible for these difficulties remain unidentified. Without systematic evidence on teachers' strengths, weaknesses, and priority needs, professional development programs may rely on generalized training rather than interventions that respond to actual gaps. A needs assessment can therefore provide a more precise basis for determining what teachers need to learn, improve, or strengthen.

The present study addresses these gaps by conducting a systematic needs assessment of elementary teachers' special education competencies for inclusive education. Rather than focusing solely on teachers' attitudes or perceptions, the study will examine their competency levels across identified areas relevant to inclusive classroom practice and determine the areas in which they demonstrate greater or lesser proficiency. It will further identify their professional development needs based on the competency gaps revealed by the assessment. In doing so, the study will provide empirical evidence that can distinguish between areas in which teachers are already adequately prepared and areas requiring targeted capacity building.

The importance of the study also lies in its potential to provide context-specific evidence for professional development planning. Instead of applying a one-size-fits-all approach to teacher training, the findings may help school administrators and education stakeholders determine which competencies should receive greater emphasis. The results may also provide a baseline for designing interventions such as competency-based training, Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, capability-building workshops, mentoring programs,

coaching activities, and other professional development initiatives specifically responsive to the identified needs of elementary teachers.

Therefore, this study entitled "Bridging the Gap: A Needs Assessment of Elementary Teachers' Special Education Competencies for Inclusive Education" is timely and relevant. It responds to the identified research gap by moving beyond general discussions of teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and challenges toward a systematic examination of specific competency levels and corresponding professional development needs. By identifying the areas in which competency gaps are most evident, the study can provide a stronger empirical basis for targeted teacher development and more effective implementation of inclusive education. Ultimately, the findings will serve as the basis for the development of a Special Education Competency Enhancement Program, which may include a competency-based training framework, LAC modules, capability-building workshops, mentoring plans, or a comprehensive professional development program. Through this evidence-based approach, the study seeks to contribute to the continuing efforts of the Department of Education to strengthen teacher capacity, improve inclusive classroom practices, and ensure equitable and quality education for all learners.

Statement of the problem

This study assessed the Special Education competencies of elementary teachers for inclusive education at Biga Elementary School for School Year 2026-2027.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the profile of the teacher respondents in terms of age and sex, highest educational attainment, years of teaching experience, teaching position, and previous training attended related to inclusive education, learner support, school-based referral, or behavior management?
2. What are the perceived importance and self rated competence of non-SNED-trained elementary teachers in early recognition of learner support needs in terms of recognizing persistent concerns in learning, communication, participation, social interaction, and behavior, documenting classroom observations objectively, providing appropriate initial classroom support, and determining when consultation or school-based referral is necessary?
3. What are the perceived importance and self rated competence of non-SNED trained elementary teachers in school-based referral and collaboration in terms of consulting appropriate school personnel, communicating observed learner concerns professionally and respectfully, coordinating with parents or guardians, maintaining confidentiality and proper documentation, and following appropriate school-based referral procedures?
4. What are the perceived importance and self rated competence of non-SNED trained elementary teachers in positive behavior support in terms of establishing clear classroom expectations and routines, using preventive and positive behavior-support strategies, reinforcing appropriate learner behavior, responding calmly and consistently to challenging behavior, and promoting learner participation, self-regulation, and dignity?
5. Which specific competencies across the three domains emerge as priority training needs among the teacher respondents?
6. What Learning Action Cell session arrangements do the teacher respondents prefer in terms of training topics, delivery modes, learning activities, and support mechanisms?
7. Based on the identified priority training needs and the preferred session arrangements of the teacher respondents, what Proposed Special Education Competency

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Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers may be developed for non-SNED-trained elementary teachers at Biga Elementary School?

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a quantitative descriptive survey research design anchored on Borich's Needs Assessment Model (1980). The design was appropriate because it provided a systematic means of describing and prioritizing the Special Education competency training needs of non-SNED-trained elementary teachers at Biga Elementary School during School Year 2026–2027. Specifically, the study gathered and described information concerning the demographic and professional characteristics of the respondents, their perceived importance of selected competencies, their self-assessed competence in performing these competencies, and their preferred arrangements for Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions. Since the study was descriptive in nature, no variables were manipulated and no causal relationships were established. Instead, the study examined the perceived discrepancy between the importance attached to specific competencies and the respondents' perceived ability to perform them.

The competency assessment encompassed three domains: early recognition of learner support needs, school-based referral and collaboration, and positive behavior support. The first domain covered competencies related to recognizing persistent concerns in learning, communication, participation, social interaction, and behavior; objectively documenting classroom observations; providing appropriate initial classroom support; and determining when consultation or school-based referral was warranted. The second domain included consulting appropriate school personnel, communicating learner concerns professionally and respectfully, coordinating with parents or guardians, maintaining confidentiality and proper documentation, and following established school-based referral procedures. The third domain focused on establishing clear classroom expectations and routines, utilizing preventive and positive behavior-support strategies, reinforcing appropriate learner behavior, responding calmly and consistently to challenging behavior, and promoting learner participation, self-regulation, and dignity.

A structured questionnaire was administered to the 38 teacher-respondents. Each identified competency was assessed using two dimensions: perceived importance and self-rated competence. Perceived importance referred to the degree to which the respondent considered a particular competency essential in supporting learners within inclusive classroom settings. Self-rated competence referred to the respondent's perceived ability to demonstrate and apply the competency in his or her current teaching practice. Both dimensions were measured using a five-point rating scale. For perceived importance, the ratings were interpreted as follows: 5 (Very Important), 4 (Important), 3 (Moderately Important), 2 (Slightly Important), and 1 (Not Important). For self-rated competence, the ratings were interpreted as 5 (Highly Competent), 4 (Competent), 3 (Moderately Competent), 2 (Slightly Competent), and 1 (Not Competent).

The treatment and analysis of the competency data followed a sequential process that began with the teacher ratings and proceeded to the mean importance and competence scores, the individual discrepancy scores, and the Mean Weighted Discrepancy Score (MWDS). It then continued to the ranking of competencies within domains, the ranking of domains, and finally the overall ranking of competencies. The first stage involved gathering the importance and competence ratings of the 30 respondents for each of the 14 identified competencies. These ratings constituted the primary numerical data for the needs assessment. The importance ratings reflected how essential the respondents considered each competency, whereas the competence ratings reflected their perceived ability to perform it. The two dimensions were initially

examined separately because a competency could be regarded as highly important even when respondents perceived that they had limited competence in performing it.

For each competency, the mean importance score was calculated by summing the importance ratings provided by all respondents and dividing the result by the total number of respondents. The formula was $\bar{I} = \Sigma I / N$, where $\bar{I}$ was the mean importance score, ΣI was the sum of all importance ratings, and N was the total number of respondents. The resulting mean represented the overall level of importance assigned to the competency. A higher mean importance score indicated that the competency was generally regarded by the respondents as more essential to effective support of learners in inclusive classrooms. Similarly, the mean competence score for each competency was obtained by summing the competence ratings of all respondents and dividing the total by the number of respondents. The formula was $\bar{C} = \Sigma C / N$, where $\bar{C}$ was the mean competence score, ΣC was the sum of all competence ratings, and N was the total number of respondents. The mean competence score represented the respondents' overall perception of their ability to perform the competency. A higher mean indicated a higher perceived level of competence, whereas a lower mean indicated an area in which respondents might require further knowledge, skills, guidance, or practice.

The second stage determined the individual discrepancy score for every respondent and competency. This was obtained by subtracting the respondent's competence rating from his or her corresponding importance rating, expressed as $D = I - C$, where D was the discrepancy score, I was the individual importance rating, and C was the individual competence rating. A positive discrepancy indicated that the respondent considered the competency more important than his or her perceived level of competence. A discrepancy score of zero indicated that the importance and competence ratings were equal. A negative discrepancy indicated that the respondent's perceived competence was higher than the importance rating assigned to the competency. The discrepancy score therefore provided an initial indication of the perceived gap between the importance of a competency and the respondent's current level of competence.

The third stage involved the computation of the MWDS for each competency. In accordance with Borich's Needs Assessment Model, the individual discrepancy scores were weighted according to the mean importance score of the corresponding competency. The weighted discrepancy score was calculated as $WD = (I - C) \times \bar{I}$, where WD was the weighted discrepancy, $I - C$ was the individual discrepancy score, and $\bar{I}$ was the mean importance score of the competency. Weighting the discrepancy score according to the mean importance gave greater consideration to competency gaps involving areas that respondents regarded as highly important. Thus, a large competency gap in a highly important area received greater weight than a similar gap involving a competency considered less important. The weighted discrepancy scores of all 30 respondents were then summed and divided by the total number of respondents to obtain the MWDS for each competency. The formula was $MWDS = \Sigma[(I - C) \times \bar{I}] / N$, where MWDS was the Mean Weighted Discrepancy Score, I was the individual importance rating, C was the individual competence rating, $\bar{I}$ was the mean importance score of the competency, and N was the total number of respondents. In practical application, the researcher determined the discrepancy score of each of the 30 respondents for a particular competency, multiplied each discrepancy by the mean importance score of that competency, summed the resulting weighted discrepancy scores, and divided the total by 30. This procedure generated one MWDS for each of the competencies.

The MWDS was likewise expressed in simplified form as $MWDS = \bar{D} \times \bar{I}$, where $\bar{D}$ was the mean discrepancy score and $\bar{I}$ was the mean importance score. This simplified computation yielded the same result because the same mean importance score was applied to all individual discrepancy scores under a particular competency. However, the complete MWDS formula was presented in the methodology to clearly demonstrate how the individual ratings contributed to the final score. The MWDS served as the principal basis for determining

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training priority. A higher positive MWDS indicated a greater weighted discrepancy between the perceived importance of a competency and the respondents' self-rated competence, suggesting a greater need for professional development. A lower positive MWDS indicated a relatively smaller training need. An MWDS of zero indicated that the average importance and competence ratings were equal, while a negative MWDS indicated that the respondents' perceived competence exceeded the importance rating. Consistent with the purpose of Borich's model, the MWDS values were primarily interpreted through ranking, rather than through predetermined numerical cut-off points.

The fourth stage involved ranking the competencies within each competency domain. The MWDS values of the four competencies under early recognition of learner support needs were arranged from highest to lowest. The same procedure was applied to the five competencies under school-based referral and collaboration and the five competencies under positive behavior support. Within each domain, the competency with the highest MWDS was assigned the highest priority rank. This ranking identified the particular competencies requiring the greatest attention within each major area of teacher competency development. The fifth stage determined the overall priority ranking of the three competency domains. To obtain a comparable domain-level score, the MWDS values of all competencies belonging to each domain were summed and divided by the number of competencies within that domain, expressed as Domain MWDS = Σ Competency MWDS / Number of Competencies in the Domain. The average MWDS was used rather than the total MWDS because the three domains did not contain an equal number of competencies. Early recognition of learner support needs consisted of four competencies, while school-based referral and collaboration and positive behavior support each consisted of five competencies. Using the average MWDS therefore provided a more equitable basis for comparing the overall training priority of the three domains. The domain with the highest average MWDS received the highest rank and was interpreted as the domain requiring the greatest overall training attention.

The sixth and final stage of the Borich analysis involved the overall ranking of all competencies. The competencies from the three domains were combined and arranged according to their MWDS, from highest to lowest. The resulting ranking identified the specific competencies that represented the most pressing training needs of the teacher-respondents regardless of their domain classification. The analysis consequently provided three levels of prioritization: the competency ranking within each domain, the ranking of the three competency domains, and the overall ranking of all competencies. These results provided a basis for determining and sequencing the content of the proposed Learning Action Cell sessions.

The demographic and professional characteristics of the teacher-respondents were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. The perceived importance and self-rated competence of the competencies identified in the three domains were summarized using means. The preferred Learning Action Cell arrangements, including training topics, delivery modes, learning activities, and support mechanisms, were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages, or mean scores when the questionnaire item required a rating rather than a categorical response. The MWDS and corresponding rankings, together with the respondents' preferred LAC arrangements, provided the empirical basis for developing context-appropriate and responsive Learning Action Cell sessions for non-SNED-trained elementary teachers. Borich's Needs Assessment Model provided the principal analytical framework of the study because it considered both the importance of a competency and the respondents' perceived competence rather than identifying training needs solely from low competence ratings. Through this approach, competencies that were both important to inclusive classroom practice

and associated with greater perceived competency gaps were identified and ranked as priority areas for professional development. The study was limited to the respondents' perceptions, self-assessments, and reported preferences. It did not involve the diagnosis or classification of learners, determination of the prevalence of disabilities or other learner support needs, or objective evaluation of teachers' actual classroom performance. Furthermore, the proposed Learning Action Cell sessions were not implemented or evaluated as part of the present study. Instead, the identified priority competencies, domain rankings, overall competency ranking, and preferred LAC session arrangements served as the basis for formulating the Proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers at Biga Elementary School.

The study followed a systematic procedure guided by the Input-Process-Output (IPO) Model to ensure that the research objectives were addressed logically and systematically. The model guided the identification of the required data, the procedures for data collection and analysis, and the development of the proposed Learning Action Cell sessions, and this flow of the study was also presented schematically in Figure 2. The input included the teacher-respondents' demographic and professional profiles in terms of age and sex, highest educational attainment, years of teaching experience, teaching position, subject or learning area handled, and previous relevant training. It also included their ratings of the perceived importance and self-rated competence of competencies under the three domains of early recognition of learner support needs, school-based referral and collaboration, and positive behavior support, as well as their preferred LAC arrangements in terms of training topics, delivery modes, learning activities, and support mechanisms. In the process stage, the researcher secured the necessary approvals and informed consent before administering the structured questionnaire to the 30 non-SNED-trained elementary teachers. The collected data were checked, coded, organized, and statistically treated. Frequency and percentage were used for the respondents' profiles and preferred LAC arrangements, while weighted mean was used to determine perceived importance and self-rated competence. Borich's MWDS was then computed for each competency and ranked to identify the priority training needs, and the findings were analyzed and interpreted in relation to the research questions. The output of the study was the Proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers at Biga Elementary School, based on the ranked priority training needs and the respondents' preferred LAC session arrangement.

The study was conducted at Biga Elementary School, a public elementary school located in Barangay Biga, Toledo City, Cebu, whose location is also shown in the location map of the environment presented as Figure 3. As of School Year 2026–2027, the school had a total enrollment of 470 learners and 38 elementary teachers who provided instruction across different grade levels while addressing the varied academic, behavioral, social, and developmental needs of their pupils. Biga Elementary School was selected as the locale of the study because it provided a suitable and relevant setting for assessing the Special Education competencies and professional development needs of elementary teachers in the context of inclusive education. As a regular public elementary school, it caters to learners with diverse abilities, learning profiles, and educational needs, including learners who may require additional instructional support, classroom accommodations, behavioral interventions, or other forms of assistance. Teachers across grade levels encounter learners with varying degrees of learning and developmental needs, requiring them to adapt instruction and classroom practices to promote meaningful participation and learning for all pupils.

The diversity of the learner population makes Biga Elementary School particularly appropriate for examining teachers' preparedness in key areas of Special Education. Teachers may be required to recognize signs that a learner needs additional support, coordinate with school personnel and parents or guardians when concerns arise, and implement appropriate

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classroom strategies to address behavioral and learning needs. These responsibilities highlight the importance of teachers' competencies in early recognition of learner support needs, school-based referral and collaboration, and positive behavior support. Furthermore, the school supports the Department of Education's commitment to inclusive education by promoting equitable opportunities for learners to participate and succeed in the teaching and learning process. However, differences in teachers' training, experience, and exposure to Special Education practices may result in varying levels of preparedness in addressing diverse learner needs. These conditions make Biga Elementary School an appropriate setting for identifying teachers' competency strengths, gaps, and priority professional development needs. The findings can provide a contextual basis for developing a Special Education Competency Enhancement Program.

The respondents of the study consisted of the 38 elementary teachers of Biga Elementary School, Barangay Biga, Toledo City, Cebu. The study employed total enumeration sampling, wherein all teachers who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate. This approach was appropriate because the study intended to obtain a comprehensive assessment of the Special Education competencies and professional development needs of all eligible elementary teachers within the school. To be included in the study, teachers were currently assigned to teach at the elementary level at Biga Elementary School during the School Year 2026–2027 and were willing to participate by providing their informed consent. Since the study focused on the competencies of regular elementary teachers in implementing inclusive education, respondents were expected to be directly involved in classroom instruction and in addressing the diverse educational needs of learners. Teachers who were on leave during the data-gathering period, were not assigned to regular elementary classes, or chose not to participate in the study were excluded from the research.

Of the 38 teacher-respondents, 36 were female and 2 were male. As shown in the distribution of respondents in Table 1, the group of non-SNED-trained secondary teachers numbered 38 (f), which accounted for 100.00% of the respondents, and the total likewise comprised 38 (f), or 100.00%. Their participation was essential because they were directly responsible for implementing inclusive classroom practices and responding to the varying needs of learners. Their responses provided valuable information regarding the perceived importance of identified Special Education competencies and their self-rated level of competence in implementing inclusive education, particularly in the areas of knowledge of inclusive education and Special Education principles, identification and assessment of learners with special educational needs, differentiated instruction and curriculum adaptation, classroom and behavior management, assessment and instructional accommodations, and collaboration with parents, specialists, and other stakeholders. Using Borich's Needs Assessment Model (1980), the teachers' responses were analyzed to determine the discrepancy between the level of importance they assigned to each competency and their perceived level of competence in performing it. The identified competency gaps were used to prioritize the professional development needs of the respondents and served as the basis for developing a proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for the elementary teachers of Biga Elementary School.

The primary instrument of this study was a researcher-developed structured questionnaire designed to gather the information needed to assess the Special Education competencies and priority training needs of elementary teachers at Biga Elementary School. The questionnaire was anchored on Borich's Needs Assessment Model, which compares the perceived importance of a competency with the teacher's self-rated competence in performing that competency. This comparison helped identify competency gaps and determine the areas

that required greater attention for professional development toward effective inclusive education. The questionnaire was aligned with the objectives of the study, "Bridging the Gap: A Needs Assessment of Elementary Teachers' Special Education Competencies for Inclusive Education," and focused on three major competency areas: early recognition of learner support needs, school-based referral and collaboration, and positive behavior support. It also included items that determined the respondents' preferred Learning Action Cell (LAC) session arrangements, which provided a basis for developing appropriate professional learning activities. The questionnaire was administered to the elementary teachers of Biga Elementary School who were identified as respondents of the study, and it consisted of five parts.

Part I gathered the profile of the teacher-respondents. It included information such as age, sex, highest educational attainment, years of teaching experience, teaching position, grade level or learning area handled, and relevant trainings or professional development activities previously attended related to Special Education, inclusive education, learner support, school-based referral and collaboration, or behavior management. This information was used to describe the respondents and provide relevant background for the interpretation of the study findings. Checklist and fill-in-the-blank formats were used where appropriate. Part II assessed the respondents' perceived importance and self-rated competence in early recognition of learner support needs. The competency statements covered the ability to recognize persistent concerns in learners' learning, communication, participation, social interaction, and behavior; document classroom observations objectively; provide appropriate initial classroom support; and determine when consultation, further assessment, or school-based referral was necessary. The respondents rated each competency according to its perceived importance and their self-rated competence. Part III assessed the respondents' perceived importance and self-rated competence in school-based referral and collaboration. The competency statements included consulting appropriate school personnel regarding learner concerns, communicating observations in a professional and respectful manner, coordinating with parents or guardians, maintaining confidentiality, preparing appropriate documentation, and following established school-based referral procedures. These paired ratings helped determine the competency gaps of the teachers in referral and collaborative practices. Part IV assessed the respondents' perceived importance and self-rated competence in positive behavior support. The competency statements focused on establishing clear classroom expectations and routines, using preventive and positive behavior-support strategies, reinforcing appropriate learner behavior, responding calmly and consistently to challenging behavior, and promoting learner participation, self-regulation, inclusion, and dignity. The responses were used to identify competencies that required further enhancement through professional development.

For Parts II, III, and IV, each competency statement was rated using two dimensions. The first dimension was perceived importance, which referred to the extent to which the respondent considered the competency important in supporting learners in an inclusive classroom. The second dimension was self-rated competence, which referred to the respondent's perceived ability to perform the competency effectively in actual classroom practice. The paired ratings were used to compute the MWDS based on Borich's Needs Assessment Model. Competencies that were perceived to be highly important but in which teachers reported relatively lower competence indicated greater competency gaps. These competencies were ranked according to their MWDS to determine the priority training needs of the elementary teachers. Part V determined the respondents' preferred LAC session arrangements. It included items concerning preferred training topics, delivery modes, learning activities, session arrangements, and support mechanisms. The information gathered from this section was considered in designing professional development activities that were responsive to the identified competency gaps and the teachers' preferred ways of learning.

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The data gathered from the five parts of the questionnaire were analyzed using appropriate statistical procedures. Frequency and percentage were used to describe the profile of the teacher-respondents. For Parts II, III, and IV, the responses on perceived importance and self-rated competence were analyzed using weighted mean and MWDS. The resulting scores were used to identify and rank the teachers' priority training needs in the three identified Special Education competency areas, and the results of Part V were summarized to determine the teachers' preferred LAC session arrangements. The findings of the needs assessment served as the basis for developing the Proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers at Biga Elementary School. The proposed program was designed to address the identified competency gaps in early recognition of learner support needs, school-based referral and collaboration, and positive behavior support, while considering the teachers' preferred LAC session arrangements. In this way, the proposed program provided a contextualized professional development response to the identified needs of elementary teachers and supported the implementation of inclusive education in the school. Before the questionnaire was administered, it underwent content validation by qualified experts in Special Education or inclusive education, educational research, and educational measurement. The validators evaluated the instrument in terms of clarity, relevance, appropriateness, organization, and alignment with the objectives and research questions of the study. Their comments and recommendations were considered in revising and improving the questionnaire. After the necessary revisions, the questionnaire was pilot-tested among elementary teachers from another school with characteristics similar to Biga Elementary School, provided that they were not included as respondents in the actual study. The results of the pilot testing were used to assess the clarity, consistency, and reliability of the instrument. Further revisions were made as necessary before the final questionnaire was administered to the elementary teachers of Biga Elementary School.

The researcher gave utmost importance to the ethical conduct of the study to protect the rights, welfare, privacy, and dignity of all participants. The study was conducted with honesty, transparency, fairness, and professionalism throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and all information gathered was used solely for the purposes of this academic study. The study complied with the ethical policies of the institution and the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). Prior to data collection, the researcher secured permission from the appropriate school authorities. The participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, duration, and nature of the study and were asked to provide informed consent before answering the questionnaire. With respect to conflict of interest, the researcher declared that there was none in the conduct of the study. The research was conducted independently, and the data and findings were presented objectively without favoring any individual or group. With respect to privacy and confidentiality, the identity and responses of the participants were kept confidential. Only information necessary for the study was collected, all research records were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher, and findings were presented in aggregate form to prevent the identification of individual respondents.

In the informed consent process, participants received a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and their rights. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents could decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or negative consequences. Consent was obtained only after the participants had understood the nature of the study. For the protection of participants, the researcher ensured that all elementary teachers participating in the study were treated with respect and professionalism. Since the study focused on teachers' perceptions of their Special Education competencies and training needs for inclusive education, reasonable measures were taken to

prevent embarrassment, discrimination, or undue pressure. In the recruitment process, participants were selected according to the study's established criteria. They were invited respectfully and were given adequate time to decide whether to participate, and no coercion, undue influence, or inappropriate incentives were used. The risk assessment determined that the study involved minimal risk because participants only answered questions regarding the perceived importance and self-rated competence of Special Education competencies and their professional development needs. The questionnaire avoided unnecessarily sensitive or intrusive questions, and no significant physical, psychological, social, legal, or professional risks were anticipated. Regarding the benefits and rights of participants, they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Although no direct financial benefit was expected, their participation contributed to identifying priority areas for professional development in Special Education and inclusive education. The findings served as a basis for developing the Proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers, including appropriate Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions and other capacity building activities at Biga Elementary School.

The data collection process was conducted in three stages, namely the Preliminary Stage, the Data-Gathering Stage, and the Post-Data-Gathering Stage, to ensure an organized, reliable, and ethical research process. In the Preliminary Stage, the researcher developed a structured questionnaire based on the study objectives, the Statement of the Problem, the identified competency domains, and Borich's Needs Assessment Model. The instrument was validated by experts in special education, research, and educational measurement, and their recommendations were incorporated to improve the questionnaire's clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study. If necessary, the revised instrument was pilot-tested with teachers who had similar characteristics to the target respondents but were not included in the actual study. After finalizing the instrument, the researcher secured approval from the appropriate school and education authorities through a transmittal letter. In coordination with the school head of Biga Elementary School, eligible elementary teachers were identified. The purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and confidentiality of the study were explained, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

In the Data-Gathering Stage, the researcher administered a printed, structured training needs assessment questionnaire to the eligible elementary teachers of Biga Elementary School using a total enumeration approach. The questionnaire gathered information on the respondents' demographic and professional profiles, perceived importance and self-rated competence in the identified special education competency areas, and preferred learning arrangements for competency enhancement. The researcher personally distributed and retrieved the questionnaires. Clear instructions were provided, and respondents' questions were addressed without influencing their answers. To minimize disruption to teaching responsibilities, the questionnaires were completed during free periods, vacant periods, or other available non-teaching hours. No names were required, and all completed questionnaires and encoded data were kept confidential and securely stored. In the Post-Data-Gathering Stage, the collected data were coded, organized, tabulated, and analyzed using appropriate statistical tools. Respondents' profiles and preferred learning arrangements were summarized, while perceived importance and self-rated competence ratings were analyzed using weighted means. The MWDS was computed to identify and rank the priority competency enhancement needs of the respondents. The findings were interpreted in relation to the research questions, and the identified priority needs and preferred learning arrangements served as the basis for developing the Proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers at Biga Elementary School. The proposed program was limited to development and was not implemented or evaluated within the scope of the study.

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The data gathered from the validated questionnaire were organized, analyzed, and interpreted using appropriate statistical tools to answer the research questions and provide a basis for the Proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers. Frequency count was used to determine the number of respondents under each category of the profile variables, including age, sex, highest educational attainment, years of teaching experience, teaching position, learning area handled, and previous training related to inclusive education, learner support, school-based referral, or behavior management. It was also used to determine the number of respondents who preferred each proposed training topic, delivery mode, learning activity, and support mechanism. Percentage was used to determine the proportion of respondents in each category and to summarize their preferred components of the proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program. The formula was $P = (f / N) \times 100$, where P was the percentage, f was the frequency of responses, and N was the total number of respondents.

Weighted mean was used to determine the respondents' perceived importance of and self-rated competence in the three competency domains of early recognition of learner support needs, school-based referral and collaboration, and positive behavior support. The formula was $WM = \Sigma(fx) / N$, where WM was the weighted mean, f was the frequency of responses, x was the numerical weight assigned to each response, and N was the total number of respondents. The perceived importance rating indicated how essential the respondents considered each competency in supporting learners, while the self-rated competence rating reflected their perceived ability to perform the competency. These ratings represented the respondents' perceptions and were not interpreted as measures of actual teaching performance. Borich's MWDS was used to identify and prioritize the respondents' special education training needs, as it determined the discrepancy between the importance assigned to each competency and the respondents' perceived competence in performing it. The formula was $MWDS = \Sigma[(I - C) \times \bar{I}] / N$, where MWDS was the Mean Weighted Discrepancy Score, I was the individual perceived importance rating, C was the individual self-rated competence rating, $\bar{I}$ was the mean perceived importance rating of the competency, and N was the total number of respondents. For each competency, the difference between the perceived importance and self-rated competence was multiplied by the mean importance rating. The resulting weighted discrepancy scores were then summed and divided by the total number of respondents. A higher positive MWDS indicated a greater discrepancy between the competency's perceived importance and the respondents' self-rated competence, indicating a higher priority training need.

Standard deviation was employed to measure the degree of variation in the respondents' ratings relative to the mean. It was used to assess the variability of the scores for perceived importance and self-rated competence across the identified competencies. A lower standard deviation indicated that the responses were closely clustered around the mean, whereas a higher standard deviation reflected greater differences among the respondents' ratings. Thus, this measure provided an indication of the consistency or variability of the respondents' perceptions regarding the importance and level of competence associated with the identified competencies. Ranking was used to arrange the competencies from the highest to the lowest MWDS. Competencies with higher MWDS values were given higher priority because they represented greater training needs. The ranking served as a major basis for determining the priority competencies and training topics to be included in the Proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers. The respondents' preferred training topics, delivery modes, learning activities, and support mechanisms were also summarized using frequency, percentage, and rank. These findings were considered together with the identified

competency gaps in designing a program that responded to the specific professional development needs of the respondents.

Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient, or Pearson's r, was used to determine whether a significant relationship existed between the respondents' perceived importance of Special Education competencies and their self-rated competence in these competencies. This statistical test was appropriate because the study examined the relationship between two sets of numerical ratings obtained from the same group of elementary teachers. The Pearson's r coefficient indicated the direction and strength of the relationship between perceived importance and self-rated competence. A positive correlation indicated that teachers who assigned higher importance to the identified Special Education competencies also tended to report higher levels of competence. Conversely, a negative correlation indicated that higher ratings in one variable were associated with lower ratings in the other. A correlation coefficient close to zero suggested a weak or negligible linear relationship between the two variables. The statistical significance of the computed correlation was determined using the predetermined level of significance. The null hypothesis was tested to establish whether the relationship between the respondents' perceived importance of Special Education competencies and their self-rated competence was statistically significant. The findings were used to determine whether teachers' perceptions of the importance of the identified competencies were significantly associated with their perceived level of competence, thereby providing evidence for the development of the proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers.

In the scoring procedure, each competency under the three domains was rated using two dimensions: perceived importance and self-rated competence. Perceived importance referred to the extent to which respondents considered a competency essential in supporting learners with diverse learning needs. Self-rated competence referred to their perceived ability to perform the competency in their current teaching practice. The ratings were used to compute the MWDS for each competency, and the resulting MWDS values were ranked to establish the relative priority of the training needs. No fixed descriptive interpretation was assigned to the MWDS because its primary purpose was to identify the relative training priorities of the respondents. Higher positive MWDS values indicated greater competency gaps and higher priority for training. The ranked competency needs, together with the respondents' preferred training topics, delivery modes, learning activities, and support mechanisms, served as the basis for developing the Proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents and discusses the data gathered from 38 elementary teacher respondents in the study "Bridging the Gap: A Needs Assessment of Elementary Teachers' Special Education Competencies for Inclusive Education." The data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, rankings, weighted means, standard deviations, aggregate and grand means, and the Pearson r correlation test at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings are interpreted in direct relation to the objectives of the study, namely the respondents' profile, the importance of training and the competence of non-SNED-trained elementary teachers in early recognition, school-based referral and collaboration, and positive behaviour support, their preferred Learning Action Cell (LAC) arrangements, and the relationship between the importance of training and competence. The discussion rests only on the data gathered and is connected to existing literature to clarify its meaning.

Profile of the respondents

Of the 38 respondents, 36 or 94.74% were female and 2 or 5.26% were male. By age, 14 respondents or 36.84% were aged 30-34 years, 11 or 28.95% were aged 35-39 years, 7 or 18.42% were above 39 years, and 6 or 15.79% were aged 25-29 years. By sex within the age groups, there were 6 female respondents (15.79%) and 1 male respondent (2.63%) above 39 years, 11 females (28.95%) and no males (0.00%) aged 35-39, 13 females (34.21%) and 1 male (2.63%) aged 30-34, and 6 females (15.79%) and no males (0.00%) aged 25-29. Taken together, 25 respondents or 65.79% were between 30 and 39 years old. The predominance of women is consistent with UNESCO's (2024) report that women make up a large proportion of the global teaching workforce, particularly in primary education. The concentration of respondents in the 30-39 age range suggests a group of established teachers rather than novices. Age and sex nonetheless do not measure competence in inclusive education. Raguindin and Yan Ping (2025) identified competencies such as understanding inclusion, valuing learner diversity, applying inclusive pedagogy, building partnerships, engaging in professional development, and observing ethical and human rights principles, all of which concern what teachers know and can do. Saguidec (2026) similarly reported that the perceived competence of elementary teachers in Benguet was not significantly differentiated by age and sex, pointing instead to training and professional development.

In terms of educational attainment, 26 respondents or 68.42% had earned master's units, 6 or 15.79% were college graduates, 5 or 13.16% were master's graduates, and 1 or 2.63% had earned doctorate units. Thus 36 of the 38 respondents, or 94.74%, had pursued education beyond the college level. This is consistent with the emphasis of the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers on continuing professional development and lifelong learning (Department of Education [DepEd], 2017). The fact that 68.42% have master's units but no completed master's degree also suggests room for further academic advancement. Because teacher quality encompasses professional knowledge, practice, and engagement that develop progressively (DepEd, 2017), advanced attainment is a foundation for development and not a direct measure of competency. The Global Education Monitoring Report Team (2020) and UNESCO (2023) likewise stress that inclusive education requires teachers with appropriate knowledge, attitudes, capacities, and continuing professional development.

Regarding teaching experience, 20 respondents or 52.63% had 6-10 years of experience, 16 or 42.11% had 11-15 years, and 2 or 5.26% had 1-5 years. Hence 36 of 38 respondents, or 94.74%, had six or more years of service. Kini and Podolsky (2016) found in their review of 30 studies that teacher effectiveness generally improves with experience, with the greatest gains in early years but continuing into later career stages. Ladd and Sorensen (2017) similarly found that teachers continued to improve with experience, with positive effects on student test performance, behavior, and absenteeism. Darling-Hammond and Snyder (2000) noted that teaching increasingly requires understanding learner variability. Experience, however, does not automatically translate into special education competency. Raguindin and Yan Ping (2025) showed that effective inclusion depends on specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes, which strengthens the rationale for assessing the respondents' special education competencies directly.

On current teaching position, 22 respondents or 57.89% were Teacher III, 11 or 28.95% were Teacher II, 4 or 10.53% were Teacher I, and 1 or 2.63% was a SPED Teacher II. Teacher II and Teacher I together accounted for 39.48% of respondents. Teacher III is associated with the Beginning towards Proficient career stage under the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (DepEd, 2017, 2025), and DepEd (2025) describes career progression as competency-based. Because only one respondent was a SPED Teacher II, this result should not be

generalized. Gore et al. (2024) found that years of teaching experience alone did not significantly explain differences in teaching quality, which supports a competency-based assessment across positions.

All 38 respondents or 100.00% had attended seminars, and none fell in the "have not attended" category. The OECD (2019) reported that more than 90% of teachers across participating systems had attended at least one professional development activity in the year before TALIS 2018, with courses and seminars among the most common forms, and the OECD (2025) described participation in continuous professional learning as nearly universal in many systems. Donath et al. (2023), in a meta-analysis of 342 studies involving more than 155,000 participants, found positive effects of professional development on teachers' knowledge, skills, and beliefs related to inclusive education. The respondents therefore have had exposure to professional learning, which provides context for the competence ratings reported below.

Importance of training for learner support needs

For early recognition, the aggregate mean was 4.18 (SD = 0.64), described as Important, with relatively consistent responses. "Documenting classroom observations objectively" had the highest weighted mean of 4.42 (SD = 0.64, Highly Important), followed by "Recognizing persistent concerns in learning, communication, participation, social interaction, and behaviour" at 4.32 (SD = 0.70, Highly Important). "Providing appropriate initial classroom support" obtained 4.05 (SD = 0.61, Important), and "Capacity to determine when consultation or school-based referral is necessary" obtained the lowest mean of 3.92 (SD = 0.59, Important). Smeets and Roeleveld (2016) found that teachers' identification of special educational needs was associated with observable indicators of pupils' performance, behavior, and functioning, which supports systematic observation, and McCoy et al. (2014) found that teacher observation could identify children needing further assessment. UNESCO (2020) and Gallardo and Cañete (2019) point to the need for training so that teachers can respond to identified needs. Shukla et al. (2024) found that training on learning disabilities significantly improved teachers' knowledge and practices in identification, screening, and referral, which supports attention to the lowest-rated indicator even though it remained Important.

For school-based referral and collaboration, the aggregate mean was 4.29 (SD = 0.76), Highly Important. "Coordinating with parents or guardians" was highest at 4.42 (SD = 0.72), followed by "Communicating observed learner concerns professionally and respectfully" at 4.39 (SD = 0.86), "Following appropriate school-based referral procedures" at 4.26 (SD = 0.79), and "Consulting appropriate personnel" at 4.21 (SD = 0.70), all Highly Important. "Maintaining confidentiality and proper documentation" was lowest at 4.18 (SD = 0.73) and remained Important. Syriopoulou-Delli et al. (2016) reported that 96.5% of teachers and 100% of parents considered teacher-parent communication and collaboration critical in the education of children with autism spectrum disorder. Grace and Carlo (2023) described parent-teacher collaboration as fundamental to inclusive education, and Ebron (2026) found that teacher-parent communication in implementing individualized education plans in a Philippine public elementary school was functional but irregular. Bae and Kang (2023) highlighted the importance of understanding the referral process, and Carter et al. (2022) identified communication mechanisms and shared understandings of inclusion as factors in collaborative teamwork.

For positive behaviour support, the aggregate mean was 4.30 (SD = 0.69), Highly Important. "Establishing clear classroom expectations and routines" was highest at 4.53 (SD = 0.56), followed by "Reinforcing appropriate learner behaviour" at 4.42 (SD = 0.76), "Using preventive and positive behavior-support strategies" at 4.32 (SD = 0.74), and "Promoting learner participation, self-regulation, and dignity" at 4.24 (SD = 0.68), all Highly Important.

"Responding calmly and consistently to challenging behaviour" was lowest at 4.00 (SD = 0.74), described as Important. Respondents thus placed greater emphasis on prevention, clear expectations, and reinforcement than on reactive responses. Donath et al. (2023) found that professional development had a moderate positive effect on teachers' skills (g = 0.49) and positive effects on student behavior, including approaches such as positive behavioral support.

Across the three components, the grand mean was 4.26 (SD = 0.70), Highly Important. Positive Behaviour Support had the highest mean at 4.30 (SD = 0.69), followed by School-Based Referral and Collaboration at 4.29 (SD = 0.76), both Highly Important, while Early Recognition had 4.18 (SD = 0.64) and was Important. The range of 4.18 to 4.30 shows that respondents regard all three components as important and view learner support as requiring early recognition, referral and collaboration, and behaviour support together. This accords with Simonsen et al. (2008) on evidence-based classroom management, Donath et al. (2023), Tsibidaki and Vrachna (2025) on collaboration as a professional skill, Kazanopoulos et al. (2021) on teacher-family collaboration, and Smeets and Roeleveld (2016) on the role of recognition in referral. The findings support including all three components in the proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers, with strong attention to positive behaviour support and referral and collaboration.

Competence in learner support needs

In early recognition, the aggregate mean was 4.20 (SD = 0.62), Competent. "Recognizing persistent concerns in learning, communication, participation, social interaction, and behaviour" was highest at 4.37 (SD = 0.67) and "Documenting classroom observations objectively" followed at 4.21 (SD = 0.62), both Highly Competent. "Providing appropriate initial classroom support" obtained 4.18 (SD = 0.61) and "Capacity to determine when consultation or school-based referral is necessary" obtained 4.03 (SD = 0.59), both Competent. Respondents therefore have a good foundation in noticing and documenting concerns, but deciding on the appropriate next step is less firmly established. Smeets and Roeleveld (2016) showed that teachers' recognition of learner difficulties influences referral to special education, and Donath et al. (2023) found positive effects of professional development on teachers' knowledge and skills for inclusive education. These results support retaining this area in the proposed program, especially for decisions about initial support, consultation, and referral.

In school-based referral and collaboration, the aggregate mean was 4.31 (SD = 0.76), Highly Competent. "Coordinating with parents or guardians" was highest at 4.53 (SD = 0.69). "Consulting appropriate personnel" (4.26, SD = 0.79), "Communicating observed learner concerns professionally and respectfully" (4.26, SD = 0.83), and "Maintaining confidentiality and proper documentation" (4.26, SD = 0.69) shared the same mean, and "Following appropriate school-based referral procedures" was lowest at 4.24 (SD = 0.82). All five indicators were Highly Competent. Republic Act No. 11650 (2022) provides for parent participation, multidisciplinary support, and referral mechanisms, and calls for teachers to be trained for detection, referral, and intervention, while Kazanopoulos et al. (2021) and Ebron (2026) emphasized teacher-family collaboration. Because the ratings are perceived competence and not proof of actual performance, the slightly lower rating for formal referral procedures indicates a place for continued professional development, even though regular classroom experience, school practices, and institutional referral mechanisms may explain the strong self-ratings of these non-SNED-trained teachers.

In positive behaviour support, the aggregate mean was 4.21 (SD = 0.72), Highly Competent. "Establishing clear classroom expectations and routines" was highest at 4.39 (SD

= 0.64), followed by "Using preventive and positive behavior-support strategies" at 4.29 (SD = 0.73) and "Reinforcing appropriate learner behaviour" at 4.26 (SD = 0.83), all Highly Competent. "Responding calmly and consistently to challenging behaviour" obtained 4.11 (SD = 0.65) and "Promoting learner participation, self-regulation, and dignity" obtained the lowest mean of 4.00 (SD = 0.74), both Competent. The Center on PBIS (2020, 2022, 2026) identifies predictable routines, acknowledgment of expected behavior, and consistent structured responses as important practices, and Lee and Gage (2020) found that school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports are associated with reductions in discipline problems and improvements in academic outcomes. The lower ratings for responding to challenging behavior and promoting self-regulation and dignity suggest that these skills may require more specialized knowledge and sustained development. RA 11650 (2022) provides for continuing education, training, seminars, and workshops for this purpose.

Across the components, the grand mean was 4.24 (SD = 0.70), Highly Competent. School-Based Referral and Collaboration ranked highest at 4.31 (SD = 0.76), followed by Positive Behaviour Support at 4.21 (SD = 0.72), both Highly Competent, and Early Recognition at 4.20 (SD = 0.62), Competent. The narrow range of 4.20 to 4.31 indicates a fairly balanced profile with no substantial gap. Teachers appear most confident working with parents and school personnel, while early identification, which requires distinguishing ordinary variation in learning from indicators needing further assessment, is comparatively lower. As the results are perceived competence, continuing professional development remains important for early recognition, responding to challenging behavior, and promoting self-regulation and learner dignity, in line with RA 11650 (2022).

Preferred Learning Action Cell arrangements

For training topics (multiple response), "Recognizing persistent concerns" ranked first with 37 respondents, followed by "Professional communication of learner concerns" with 32 (rank 2), "Objective classroom observation and documentation" with 31 (rank 3), "Collaboration with parents or guardians" with 30 (rank 4), "School-based consultation and referral procedures" with 29 (rank 5), "Monitoring learners' responses to initial classroom support" with 27 (rank 6), "Determining when consultation or referral is necessary" with 26 (rank 7), and "Providing appropriate initial classroom support" with 24 (rank 8). The behaviour -related topics were chosen far less often: "Supporting learner participation and self-regulation" with 5 (rank 9), "Calm and consistent responses to challenging behavior" with 4 (rank 10), "Establishing classroom expectations and routines" with 3 (rank 11), "Positive reinforcement and constructive feedback" with 2 (rank 12), and "Preventive positive behavior-support strategies" with 1 (rank 13). This is consistent with DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016, which defines the LAC as a school-based continuing professional development strategy. The first-ranked preference is supported by Sagun et al. (2022), who found early detection and intervention to be important components of inclusive education in Philippine public schools, and by Kim et al. (2021), who described a continuing cycle of referral, identification, and intervention. Kim et al. (2021) also identified poor collaboration between general and special education teachers as a factor affecting that cycle, and Sagun et al. (2022) emphasized coordination among professionals, which explains the interest in professional communication. Keenan et al. (2014) and van der Veen et al. (2023) support the value of teacher observation within a broader identification process complemented by specialist input. Dor (2022) and Chiappe et al. (2022) support the interest in collaborating with parents, and Kaur et al. (2024) showed that training in identification, screening, referral, and intervention increased knowledge and improved practices, which supports the topics on referral, monitoring, and initial support. The low frequencies for behaviour-related topics are consistent with the high competence ratings in

positive behaviour support and do not imply that these skills are unnecessary. Retuerto et al. (2020), Beqiraj et al. (2022), and Sutherland et al. (2023) document the effectiveness of behaviour support and classroom management strategies, so these topics may be incorporated as application-based or supporting components of the program.

For delivery modes (multiple response), "Seminar-workshop" ranked first with 28 respondents, followed by "Face-to-face LAC session" with 22 (rank 2), "Printed or digital self-learning material" with 20 (rank 3), "Peer mentoring or coaching" with 19 (rank 4), "Small-group workshop" with 14 (rank 5), "Demonstration session" with 7 (rank 6), and "Blended face-to-face and online session" with 2 (rank 7). Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017), in a review of 35 rigorous studies, identified active learning, collaboration, modeling, coaching, feedback, and sustained engagement as features of effective professional development, which matches the respondents' preference for interactive and structured formats. Seminar-workshops can combine expert input with practice, face-to-face LAC sessions reflect the community of practice described in DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016, and self-learning materials extend learning beyond scheduled sessions. Coaching, small-group work, and demonstration, though less frequently chosen, correspond to features identified by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017). The low preference for blended delivery suggests that online components should be used selectively, for example for resources and follow-up, while face-to-face sessions remain primary.

For learning activities, "Collaborative lesson or support planning" ranked first with 16 respondents, followed by "Peer sharing of classroom experiences" with 12 (rank 2), "Analysis of classroom scenarios" with 10 (rank 3), "Question-and-answer session with a resource person" with 8 (rank 4), "School-based referral procedure walkthrough" with 7 (rank 5), "Demonstration of strategies" with 6 (rank 6), "Clear school-based referral guidelines or procedures" with 5 (rank 7), "Case-based discussion" with 4 (rank 8), "Reflection and action planning" with 3 (rank 9), and "Development of observation and documentation samples" with 2 (rank 10). These preferences favor collaborative and job-embedded learning, consistent with DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016 and Darling-Hammond et al. (2017). The referral walkthrough is notable because referral and collaboration obtained the highest competence rating (4.31), yet referral topics were still preferred for training, so a walkthrough can turn general knowledge into a clear sequence of actions. Reflection can be a brief closing component of each session, and observation and documentation samples can be embedded in the more preferred activities, given that documentation ranked third among the training topics.

For support mechanisms (multiple response), "Access to relevant school support personnel" ranked first with 28 respondents, followed by "Administrative support for participation in LAC sessions" with 25 (rank 2), "Clear school-based referral guidelines or procedures" with 22 (rank 3), "Follow-up coaching or mentoring" with 7 (rank 4), "Opportunities to practice and receive feedback" with 6 (rank 5), "Printed or digital reference materials" with 5 (rank 6), "Scheduled time within the school calendar" with 3 (rank 7), "Peer consultation and collaborative planning" with 2 (rank 8), and "Sample classroom observation and documentation forms" with 1 (rank 9). The top ranking of specialist access aligns with RA 11650 (2022), which provides for Inclusive Learning Resource Centers and multidisciplinary support, and with Sagun et al. (2022) on coordination between education and health professionals. Administrative support is consistent with the school-based structure of LAC under DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016 and with the organizational conditions for sustained engagement described by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017). Clear referral guidelines respond to the uncertainty in the referral cycle described by Kim et al. (2021). Follow-up coaching, practice with feedback, reference materials, and scheduled time received far fewer selections

but remain supported by the literature on sustained professional learning. The preference for human and organizational support over additional forms suggests that sample forms be offered as supplementary tools.

Relationship between the importance of training and competence

A Pearson r test of the relationship between the importance of training and the competence of non-SNED-trained elementary teachers for learner support needs yielded $r = 0.038$, a negligible positive correlation, with $p = 0.819$. Since this p-value is greater than the 0.05 level of significance (two-tailed), the relationship is not significant and the null hypothesis of no significant relationship is not rejected. Teachers who rated training as more important did not necessarily report higher competence, and the sample provides insufficient statistical evidence of a linear association. Perceived competence can be shaped by classroom experience, prior professional development, exposure to diverse learners, school-level support, collaboration, and access to specialists. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and Desimone and Garet (2015) emphasize that the effects of professional development depend on content focus, active learning, coherence, sufficient duration, and collective participation, and not on participation alone. The result does not mean training is unnecessary. It means that perceived importance by itself does not statistically explain perceived competence in this sample, so the proposed program is justified by the identified training preferences and specific competency areas.

Synthesis

Overall, the 38 respondents were mostly female (94.74%), concentrated in the 30-39 age range (65.79%), highly educated (94.74% beyond college level), experienced (94.74% with six or more years), and universally exposed to seminars (100.00%). They rated training in learner support as Highly Important (grand mean = 4.26, SD = 0.70) and rated their own competence as Highly Competent (grand mean = 4.24, SD = 0.70), with early recognition (4.20) and decisions about consultation and referral (4.03) as the relatively weaker areas, and with responding to challenging behavior (4.11) and promoting participation, self-regulation, and dignity (4.00) also lower. Their preferences point to LAC sessions built on recognizing persistent concerns, professional communication, observation and documentation, and referral, delivered mainly through seminar-workshops and face-to-face sessions, using collaborative planning, peer sharing, and scenario analysis, and supported by access to school support personnel, administrative support, and clear referral guidelines. The non-significant relationship between importance and competence ($r = 0.038$, $p = 0.819$) shows that targeted, high-quality professional learning, not favorable perceptions alone, is needed. These findings address the study's objectives and contribute evidence from Philippine elementary schools to the literature on the preparation of general education teachers for inclusion. They provide the empirical basis for the Proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers, which is presented in the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

The study set out to assess the Special Education competencies of non-SNED-trained elementary teachers at Biga Elementary School in support of inclusive education. Using a quantitative descriptive survey design, it gathered data through a validated, researcher-developed questionnaire and analyzed them with frequency, percentage, weighted mean, standard deviation, ranking, and correlation analysis at the 0.05 level of significance. The

respondents varied in age and sex, highest educational attainment, years of teaching experience, teaching position, and previous training related to inclusive education, learner support, school-based referral, or behavior management. These differences reflect diverse professional backgrounds and experiences, which underscores the need for a development program that accommodates teachers with varying levels of preparation.

The results show that the teachers generally perceive themselves as Highly Competent in addressing learner support needs, with a grand mean of 4.24 (SD = 0.70). School-based referral and collaboration obtained the highest mean of 4.31 (SD = 0.76), followed by positive behavior support with a mean of 4.21 (SD = 0.72). Early recognition obtained a mean of 4.20 (SD = 0.62) and was interpreted as Competent, which indicates that it requires relatively greater attention than the other two domains. It may therefore be concluded that the teachers feel capable of supporting learners, particularly in referral, collaboration, and classroom behavior support, while the early identification and recognition of persistent learner concerns calls for further strengthening.

This conclusion is reinforced by the identified priority training needs. The respondents most preferred training on recognizing persistent concerns, professional communication of learner concerns, objective classroom observation and documentation, collaboration with parents or guardians, and school-based consultation and referral procedures. These priorities show that the teachers seek practical support in identifying learner needs, documenting concerns, communicating with stakeholders, and making appropriate referral decisions. Thus, even where self-rated competence is high, the teachers recognize the need for continuous and targeted professional development in these specific areas.

The preferred Learning Action Cell session arrangements further clarify how such development should be delivered. The respondents favored seminar-workshops as the delivery mode, followed by face-to-face LAC sessions and printed or digital self-learning materials. Collaborative lesson or support planning, peer sharing of classroom experiences, and analysis of classroom scenarios ranked highest among learning activities. As for support mechanisms, they prioritized access to relevant school support personnel, administrative support for participation in LAC sessions, and clear school-based referral guidelines or procedures. These preferences indicate that the teachers value professional development that is practical, collaborative, and interactive, and that is supported by appropriate school structures.

Moreover, the test of the relationship between the perceived importance of training and the teachers' self-rated competence yielded a negligible positive correlation ($r = 0.038$) with a p-value of 0.819, which is greater than the 0.05 level of significance. No significant relationship was therefore found between the two variables, and the null hypothesis was not rejected. This suggests that the teachers' perceived competence was not significantly associated with how important they considered training to be within the context of the study. Accordingly, the need for professional development should be determined by the identified competency gaps and not by the teachers' self-perceived competence alone.

Taken together, the findings lead to the overall conclusion that, although the teachers of Biga Elementary School demonstrate a generally favorable level of self-perceived competence in supporting learners, continuous and targeted professional development remains essential to sustain and strengthen inclusive education practices. Particular attention should be given to the early recognition and identification of learner support needs, objective documentation, professional communication, parent collaboration, and appropriate referral procedures. These findings provide a sound basis for the development and implementation of the Proposed Special Education Competency Enhancement Program for Elementary Teachers at Biga Elementary School. The program should respond to the identified competency needs

and employ practical, collaborative, and school-based learning experiences that help teachers become more confident and effective in recognizing learner needs and providing timely, appropriate, and coordinated support within an inclusive education environment. In light of this, it is recommended that the program be adopted to strengthen the competencies of non-SNED-trained teachers in supporting learners with diverse needs and promoting inclusive education at the school, and that it be regularly reviewed and refined so that it remains responsive to the evolving needs of teachers and learners.

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