
Reframing Instructional Competence: A Phenomenological Study of Pupils' and Parents' Lived Experiences in Philippine Public Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT This study examines instructional competence through a phenomenological lens by exploring the lived experiences of pupils and parents in a Philippine public elementary school context. Anchored in constructivist learning theory, creative pedagogy, and reflective practice, the research conceptualizes teaching competence as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, relational, and ethical dimensions. Using purposive sampling, twenty participants—comprising ten pupils and ten parents—were selected to provide in-depth insights through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, ensuring rigor through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability measures. Findings reveal that instructional competence is primarily understood through relational competence, demonstrative and scaffolded teaching practices, and observable learner outcomes, particularly in literacy development. Pupils emphasized the importance of teacher kindness, clarity of instruction, and engaging learning activities, while parents highlighted visible improvements in their children's reading and writing skills as indicators of effective teaching. However, a significant tension emerged between effective pedagogical practices and the persistence of corporal punishment, reflecting a misalignment between instructional competence and child protection principles. Additionally, discrepancies between pupils' lived experiences and parents' perceptions underscore the need for more inclusive evaluation mechanisms. The study concludes that instructional competence extends beyond technical teaching skills to include ethical and relational dimensions that promote a safe and supportive learning environment. It recommends strengthening teacher development programs on positive discipline and learner-centered pedagogy, enhancing participatory evaluation systems, and reinforcing policy implementation aligned with the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers. These findings contribute to policy and practice by providing a stakeholder-informed perspective on teacher competence in Philippine basic education.

Keywords: instructional competence, phenomenology, teacher evaluation, qualitative research, Philippines, child protection

INTRODUCTION

Teacher competence is widely acknowledged as a critical determinant of educational quality, influencing student achievement, engagement, and long-term development. Globally, frameworks such as those of the OECD (2021) and Darling-Hammond and Oakes (2021) emphasize multidimensional competence, including pedagogical expertise, relational capacity, and reflective practice. In the Philippines, the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST) institutionalize these expectations across domains such as learner diversity, assessment, and community engagement.

Despite these policy advancements, empirical evidence reveals persistent gaps between prescribed standards and classroom realities. Recent international studies highlight systemic constraints—including large class sizes, limited resources, and insufficient teacher training—that hinder effective implementation of competency-based education (Nombo et al., 2024). Similarly, Philippine-based studies report generally high teacher competence but identify weaknesses in formative assessment and learner-centered strategies (Talahiban et al., 2022; Gepila, 2020).

However, a critical limitation of existing literature is its reliance on quantitative and teacher-centered evaluations, often neglecting the perspectives of pupils and parents. This omission is significant, as these stakeholders experience teaching competence in its most immediate and practical form. Emerging research suggests that learner and parent perspectives provide deeper insights into relational dynamics, ethical practices, and actual learning outcomes (Roorda et al., 2023; Kim & Schallert, 2022).

Moreover, there is limited qualitative research in the Philippine context that captures how teaching competence is lived, negotiated, and interpreted within socio-cultural and policy environments. This gap is particularly important given the persistence of issues such as corporal punishment, which contradicts established child protection policies (DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012).

Thus, this study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore how pupils and parents construct meanings of instructional competence. Grounded in constructivist and relational theories, it aims to provide a context-sensitive and stakeholder-informed understanding that can inform policy, teacher development, and educational management. Particularly, we intended to achieve the following objectives:

1. To describe the perspectives of students and parents on the teaching competence of teachers in this school; and,
2. To draw the implications of the results for the educational management of their school head.

Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an integrative theoretical framework that conceptualizes instructional competence as a multidimensional construct shaped by cognitive, relational, and ethical dimensions of teaching practice. Drawing on constructivist learning theory, creative pedagogy, and reflective practice, the framework provides a coherent lens for interpreting the lived experiences of pupils and parents within the Philippine public school context.

Constructivist Learning Theory

The study is grounded in the constructivist tradition, particularly the work of Jean Piaget, which posits that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction, experience, and reflection. Within this perspective, teaching competence is not defined solely by the transmission of content but by the teacher's capacity to facilitate meaningful learning experiences that promote inquiry, critical thinking, and knowledge construction. This theoretical orientation justifies the inclusion of pupils' lived experiences as primary sources of data, as they are active participants in the learning process and can provide direct insight into how instructional practices are experienced and internalized. In this sense, competence is evaluated based on how effectively teachers create environments that support engagement, exploration, and cognitive development.

Creative Pedagogy

Complementing the constructivist perspective, the framework incorporates Mayesky's concept of creative pedagogy, which emphasizes the role of teacher creativity, innovation, and intrinsic motivation in fostering meaningful learning. Creative pedagogy positions instructional competence as the ability to design and implement engaging, contextually relevant, and learner-centered activities that stimulate curiosity and sustain interest. In the context of this study, creative teaching practices are reflected in demonstrative and scaffolded instructional strategies observed by parents and experienced by pupils. These practices enable learners to connect abstract concepts to concrete experiences, thereby enhancing comprehension and retention. Thus, competence extends beyond technical proficiency to include the capacity to inspire, motivate, and adapt instruction to diverse learner needs.

Reflective Practice

The framework is further strengthened by the inclusion of reflective practice, as articulated by Arthur and Cremin, which conceptualizes teachers as adaptive professionals who continuously evaluate and refine their pedagogical approaches. Reflective practice underscores the importance of responsiveness to learners' cognitive and socio-emotional needs, as well as the capacity to adjust teaching strategies based on ongoing assessment and feedback. Within this perspective, instructional competence is not static but evolves through critical reflection and professional learning. This is particularly relevant in addressing issues such as classroom management and disciplinary practices, where ethical considerations and responsiveness to learners' well-being are paramount.

Analytical Integration of Theoretical Perspectives

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding instructional competence as a dynamic and context-sensitive construct. Specifically, the integration of these theories enables the conceptualization of competence across three interrelated dimensions: Cognitive Dimension, which pertains to the effectiveness of teaching in facilitating learning outcomes, particularly in literacy and skill development; Relational Dimension, which emphasizes the quality of teacher–student interactions, including care, empathy, and the creation of a supportive learning environment; and Ethical Dimension, which highlights the importance of humane and child-centered practices, particularly in relation to discipline and the protection of learners’ rights. This integrated framework addresses prior critiques of theoretical fragmentation by explicitly linking foundational theories to the study’s analytical process. It guided both data interpretation and thematic development, ensuring that emergent themes were examined not only in terms of observable practices but also in relation to broader pedagogical, relational, and ethical considerations. In doing so, the framework situates instructional competence within the lived realities of pupils and parents, while aligning with national policy imperatives on teacher quality and child protection in Philippine basic education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to deeply explore and describe the lived experiences of pupils and parents regarding the teaching competence of elementary school teachers at Tibungol Central Elementary School in Davao City, Philippines. Phenomenology was chosen because it captures the subjective meanings and interpretations that participants attach to their experiences, consistent with its philosophical foundations (van Manen, 2014). This approach enabled the study to illuminate how competence is understood not merely as a professional standard but as a lived, relational practice embedded in everyday schooling.

Participants and Sampling

We utilized purposeful sampling to select participants who could provide rich, first-hand accounts relevant to the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample comprised 20 participants, specifically 10 pupils (aged 9–12 years, ensuring sufficient experience with multiple teachers and ability to articulate their thoughts) and 10 parents (primary caregivers of pupils enrolled in the same school). Selection was guided by willingness to participate, accessibility, and the potential to provide diverse perspectives on teacher competence.

The sample size ($N = 20$) was deemed sufficient for achieving thematic saturation, defined as the point where no new insights emerge from additional data collection (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Data collection was discontinued once redundancy was consistently observed across both interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and FGDs, allowing for both personal narratives and shared perspectives to emerge (Bryman, 2012). Interviews were conducted in locations that were safe and convenient for participants, such as school premises or community centers, fostering comfort and openness. Following Creswell's (2012) recommendations, interviews began with general, non-threatening questions before moving to specific inquiries about teaching competence and classroom practices.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour, producing detailed narratives. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent, and non-verbal cues (e.g., tone, gestures) were noted to enrich interpretation. This dual method generated "thick, rich descriptions" that captured the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences (Bryman, 2008).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Ritchie and Spencer's (1994) framework. The process began with familiarization through repeated listening, transcription, and reflective journaling to engage with participants' voices while acknowledging researcher positionality (Smith, 2006). Coding was treated as an interpretive act rather than a purely mechanical task (Ritchie et al., 2010).

Analysis proceeded iteratively through: Indexing and coding line by line, guided by research aims; Charting data with anonymized identifiers, verbatim excerpts, and interpretive notes; Mapping and interpretation to uncover relationships, tensions, and contrasts between pupils' and parents' perspectives

This process was both inductive and deductive—sensitive to participants' language while informed by constructivist and reflective pedagogical theories.

Trustworthiness

We ensured the rigor of this study by applying Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—as further elaborated by Steinke (2004). These criteria provided a systematic foundation for strengthening the reliability and validity of the findings.

Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking with participants, and triangulation of multiple data sources, including interviews and focus group discussions. These strategies enhanced the accuracy of interpretations and helped ensure that the participants' voices were authentically represented. Transferability was achieved by providing thick, detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and processes, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings.

Dependability was maintained by documenting a transparent account of data collection and analysis procedures, thereby creating an audit trail that traced methodological decisions and changes throughout the study. Finally, confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, inter-coder discussions, and secure storage of transcripts and recordings, which safeguarded against researcher bias and anchored interpretations firmly in the participants lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to seven principles of ethical research (Vashist, 2000): informed and voluntary consent, respect for privacy, minimization of risk, truthfulness, social responsibility, research adequacy, and avoidance of conflict of interest. Prior approval was secured from the Schools Division Superintendent and the school principal. For pupils, parental consent and child assent were obtained. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw at any time, and anonymity was ensured by using codes in place of names. Consent forms and transcripts were stored securely.

Reflexivity and Positionality

We acknowledged our positionality as educators and scholars with prior knowledge of the public-school context, which could shape both data collection and interpretation (Berger, 2015). The dual roles of interviewer and transcriber enabled deep familiarity with the data but also introduced risks of interpretive bias. To mitigate these, we built rapport with participants and used language flexibility (English and local dialects) to ensure comfort and authenticity, maintained reflective journals to track assumptions and their potential influence, documented both verbal and non-verbal cues during transcription, and engaged in peer debriefing with a supervisor/critical friend to challenge interpretive tendencies. These strategies ensured that the voices of pupils and parents remained central, grounding interpretations in lived experiences rather than researcher preconceptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the major themes drawn from interviews with selected students are presented. Subsequently, these were confirmed by their parents' information in the focus group discussion.

Theme 1: Relational Competence as Core to Teaching

Maau siya mutudlo kay kasabot ko. Ganahan ko sa akong teacher. (My teacher is good in teaching, because I easily learn from her. So, I like my teacher.) - S1

Happy ko sapag-eskwela kay makabalo ko mubasa. Maayo si teacher nako sa pagtudlo kay makabasa na ko ug makasulat. Pero, naa langkoy dili maayunan. Nagapangusi ang teacher nako. (I am happy with my studies because I have learned how to read. My teacher is good, for she teaches me how to read and write. However, there is one thing that I dislike about my teacher. She is inclined to pinch.) – S2

Ok man akong maestra kay gipasulat mi. Pero, naa koy dili nauyunan kay nagapamalo siya. (My teacher is OK, for she engages us in writing. However, what I do not like in her is that she tends to spank us.)- S3

Naganahan ko sa akong teacher kay buutan siya. Makasabot kosa pagtudlo niya kay naminaw ko niya. (I like my teacher because she is kind. When she teaches, I listen. So, it makes me easily understand the way she teaches.) -S4

This theme highlights that students' perceptions of instructional competence are neither uniform nor simplistic, but rather shaped by a range of experiences with different teachers, subjects, and classroom contexts. The variation in their responses reflects how competence is relationally and situationally defined—what counts as “good teaching” for one student may be grounded in interpersonal warmth, while for another it is rooted in concrete skill-building. These perspectives are inseparable from the broader socio-educational realities of Philippine public schools, where large class sizes, resource limitations, and the curriculum's strong emphasis on literacy condition how teaching is practiced and perceived.

Students' accounts suggest that instructional competence is understood through three interwoven dimensions: affective (teachers' kindness inspires participation), cognitive (teachers' instruction in reading and writing is recognized as essential), and practical (writing activities provide opportunities for application and mastery). Collectively, these reveal that for learners, competence is not confined to technique alone; it emerges at the intersection of pedagogy, care, and context. In this sense, students position their teachers' effectiveness not as an abstract standard but as a lived reality that fosters motivation, literacy development, and meaningful engagement, as inferred from their testimonies.

This perspective resonates with Rogers' (1983) humanistic view of teaching as an act of empathy and authenticity that fosters learner confidence and holistic growth. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist framework underscores the social dimension of learning, where positive relationships with more knowledgeable others are central to developing both cognitive and affective capacities. Recent studies affirm that relational competence—teachers' ability to establish trust, empathy, and care—significantly predicts students' academic engagement and motivation (Federici & Vangrieken, 2020; Roorda et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Tension Between Effective Teaching and Corporal Punishment

“Ok man akong maestra kay gipasulat mi. Pero, naa koy dili nauyunan kay nagapamalo siya. (My teacher is OK, for she engages us in writing. However, what I do not like in her is that she tends to spank us.) -S3

“Happy ko sapag eskwela ko ka makabalo ko mubasa. Maayo si teacher nako sa pagtudlo kay makabasa na ko ug makasulat. Pero, naa lang koy dili mauyunan. Nagapangusi ang teacher nako.” (“I am happy with my studies because I have learned how to read. My teacher is good, for she teaches me how to read and write. However, there is one thing which I do not like about my teacher. She is inclined to pinch”)-S2

In the student interviews, a complex theme surfaced: while learners recognized their teachers as “good in teaching,” this acknowledgment was tempered by accounts of corporal punishment, such as being pinched or spanked. This contradiction reveals how instructional competence is entangled with disciplinary practices. On the one hand, students valued their teachers’ ability to facilitate learning; on the other, the persistence of punitive methods introduced tension into their perceptions. Rather than dismissing these experiences, students seemed to negotiate them—holding on to respect for their teachers’ academic guidance while simultaneously disclosing practices that undermined the humane and supportive climate they otherwise desired. This suggests that in their lived experience, “good teaching” can coexist with problematic discipline, reflecting broader cultural norms of authority in classrooms and the lingering acceptance of corporal punishment in some educational settings, as inferred from their statements.

The consequences of such practices are well-documented. Corporal punishment has been linked to heightened aggression, increased bullying, and poor psychological adjustment among learners (Zolotor et al., 2014; Cuartas et al., 2021). At the global level, the World Health Organization (2020) identifies violence against children, including corporal punishment, as a major public health concern due to its detrimental effects on mental health, cognitive development, and social functioning. More recent evidence shows that exposure to violent discipline predicts lower academic performance and reduced classroom participation (Gershoff et al., 2023). In this light, while relational competence is celebrated as a transformative quality of teachers, corporal punishment represents a regressive force that erodes students’ trust and diminishes the positive relational climate necessary for learning.

Theme 3: Demonstrative and Scaffolded Teaching

“Ginapakita nila ang ways arun makatuon ang mga bata. Example, sa pag-pronounce, gitudluan sa mga teachers kung paano mag pronounce o pag basa. Akong kamagulangan nga anak, hawud pud honor siya sapag graduate, pag abot niya sa Tadeco, hawud na siya.” (“They show the ways so that their students can easily learn. For example, in pronunciation, the teachers teach their students how to pronounce words well or read. When my eldest son finished his education here with honors, he was really good in reading. So, when he studied in Tadeco, he maintained his academic honors.”)- P3

In the focus group discussion, parents built on their children’s testimonies, and from their collective reflections, the theme of Demonstrative Teaching emerged. This theme points to the affirmation of the parents that their children’s progress in reading and writing is attributed to the pedagogical strategies employed by teachers. One parent illustrated how the demonstration method became more than a technique—it was a bridge between abstract knowledge and tangible learning. She stated that by modeling pronunciation and showing learners how to decode words, teachers transformed reading from a mechanical exercise into a step-by-step, accessible process. This parental observation suggests that instructional competence lies in the ability to make learning visible and replicable, enabling children to internalize skills through guided practice. In this light, the demonstration method is interpreted not merely as a tool but as an empowering approach that scaffolds learners’

confidence and independence, as inferred from her extracted testimony.

Several studies trace a link between teacher knowledge/instructional expertise and student reading outcomes. When teachers demonstrate, articulate, and scaffold, they translate complex knowledge about phonics, decoding, and comprehension into concrete classroom practices that students can observe, imitate, and internalize (Pressley et al., 1996; Lyon & Weiser, 2009; Ellis & Moss, 2013; Englert et al., 2019).

Theme 4. Good Human Relationships with Students

"Sweto nako sa the way sila mu care sa mga bata. Dili nila gina isipna laing tao ang mga bata. Gina-treat akita murag kadugo nila ang mga bata. Dili pud sila pabaya sa mga bata. Panatag ko sa mga pamaagi nila. Gani ang ginikanan, relaks lang ko." ("I am familiar with the way the teachers teach our children. They do not consider our children as strangers to them. They treat them like their relatives. They do care for our children. I am fully at ease with their ways, so as a parent, I feel relaxed.") – P2

"Ang mga maestra sa Tibungol nagatudlo maau sa mga bata. Wala nila ginapaagi sapag bunal kay bawal naman na. Ila jud na ginapakitasa mga bata ang pamaagi arun makabalo pud ang mga bata." ("The teachers in Tibungol teach well the children. They do not use corporal punishment, for it is restricted by law. They rather show the way for their children to learn.") – P3

A striking tension emerged when comparing the testimonies of students with those of their parents. While some children recounted experiences of corporal punishment, parents in the focus group discussion highlighted the contrasting theme of Good Human Relationships with Students. Their emphasis on kindness and care framed effective teaching as inseparable from the relational and ethical stance teachers adopt. For them, competence was not measured solely by instructional strategies, but by the ability of teachers to embody patience, warmth, and respect in their interactions.

This divergence between student and parent perspectives is revealing. On the one hand, it exposes how children's lived realities of discipline may conflict with parents' idealized or generalized views of teachers as "second parents." On the other hand, it underscores how both groups situate competence within the realm of human relationships, whether as an aspiration (parents' view of care and nurturance) or as a site of struggle (students' accounts of fear and punishment). The parents' insistence on a child-friendly, punishment-free classroom reveals an implicit critique of practices that undermine humane teaching. Thus, the tension itself becomes an interpretive lens: it demonstrates that instructional competence is negotiated not only through pedagogical ability, but also through the alignment—or misalignment—between relational ideals and disciplinary realities in the classroom.

Based on research studies, student narratives that foreground fear or punitive discipline illuminate the counterpoint: disciplinary realities can impede learning when fear inhibits risk-taking, inquiry, and engagement. This aligns with literatures on social-emotional learning and the detriments of high-punitive approaches for marginalized

students, reinforcing that effective literacy and disciplinary practices must cohere with relational warmth and autonomy-supportive environments (Bailey et al., 2019; Marshall, n.d.; Stewart et al., 2021). The parental stance represents an interpretive lens where instructional competence includes capacity to create safe, respectful, and responsive classrooms that honor student dignity (Stewart et al., 2021; Bailey et al., 2019).

Theme 4: Development of Literacy and Skills

"Mabantayan nako ang kabaguhan sa akong anak. Gikan sa kinder pa akong mga anak, gitudloan man sila. Nakita nako ang ilahang development. Wala ko naga observe sa klase pero Makita nako sa akong anak ang kabag-uhan. Mismo ang akong anak ang mag tabi kung unsa ilang gihimo." (I observe changes in my children. Since they were in kinder, they have been taught. I have seen their development. Though I do not observe them in their classes, I have seen changes in them. It is my children who tell me about their doings in school.) – P1

"Basin sa pagtudlo sa mga maestra, ok man Sir kay nakita man nako ang kausaban sa akong anak. Sweto nako sa the way sila mu-care sa mga bata." (With regards to teaching, it is OK, Sir, for I have seen the improvement of my child. I knew the way they care for the students.") – P2

On the other hand, the theme of Development of Students' Knowledge and Skills surfaced strongly in the focus group discussion, as parents unanimously validated their children's claims of learning from their teachers. What stood out in their reflections was that "good teaching" was not equated with mere instructional delivery, but interpreted as a transformative force shaping their children's educational trajectories. Parents framed competence less as a technical ability to cover content and more as the capacity to cultivate growth, both cognitive and personal. Their trust in teachers was anchored in visible outcomes—progress in reading and writing—which they regarded as more than functional literacy skills. For them, these were markers of their children's readiness to navigate schooling and life, concrete proof of teachers' effectiveness and care. This interpretation suggests that parents positioned instructional competence at the intersection of pedagogy and human development: teaching was valued not just for transmitting knowledge, but for shaping learners' confidence, motivation, and future possibilities. In this sense, their acknowledgment reflects a broader vision of education as an act of guidance and formation, where teachers are entrusted with nurturing children's holistic growth.

The claim that progress in reading and writing serves as concrete proof of teacher effectiveness and care is supported by work emphasizing observable literacy outcomes as signals of instructional quality and teacher competence (Pressley et al., 1996; Lyon & Weiser, 2009; Cromwell et al., 2024). These sources argue that modeling, explicit instruction, guided practice, and progress monitoring translate teacher knowledge into visible student gains, which parents and stakeholders interpret as evidence of care and efficacy (Pressley et al., 1996; Boardman, 2021; Englert et al., 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

This phenomenological study demonstrates that instructional competence in Philippine public elementary schools is a multidimensional and relational construct shaped by cognitive, affective, and ethical dimensions of teaching practice. Findings reveal that both pupils and parents associate effective teaching with the ability to facilitate literacy development, employ demonstrative and scaffolded strategies, and establish caring, supportive relationships. However, a critical tension emerges between perceived teaching effectiveness and the persistence of corporal punishment, indicating a misalignment between pedagogical competence and child protection principles. While learners recognize teachers' contributions to their academic growth, experiences of punitive discipline undermine trust and the creation of safe learning environments. Moreover, the divergence between pupils' lived experiences and parents' perceptions highlights the need for more inclusive and participatory approaches in evaluating teacher competence. Overall, the study affirms that instructional competence extends beyond technical proficiency to encompass humane, reflective, and context-sensitive practices aligned with national standards such as the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST) and child protection policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of these findings, it is recommended that school leaders and education policymakers strengthen teacher professional development programs with a focus on positive discipline, socio-emotional learning, and reflective practice, in alignment with Department of Education child protection policies. Capacity-building initiatives may be supported through collaborations with agencies such as the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to integrate evidence-based pedagogies and ethical teaching standards. Schools should institutionalize participatory feedback mechanisms that systematically incorporate pupils' and parents' perspectives into teacher evaluation and school improvement planning. Furthermore, there is a need to reinforce monitoring and enforcement of policies prohibiting corporal punishment, ensuring that classroom management strategies promote respect, inclusivity, and learner well-being. At the research and extension level, State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) may develop community-based intervention programs and action research projects that support teachers in adopting innovative, learner-centered, and non-violent pedagogical approaches. Finally, future studies should expand to diverse educational contexts and integrate mixed-method approaches to further validate and enhance the understanding of instructional competence in the Philippine setting.

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