

## ARTICLE

# A Pilot Survey of Perceived Competence of Pre-Service School Practitioners in Inclusive Education for Students with Special Needs

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## ABSTRACT

Inclusive education provides a learning environment that enriches learning of all students. Attitudes about inclusive education are essential to its implementation. Therefore, school practitioners need training to advance their attitudes, knowledge, skills, and actions. This study examines the pre-service school practitioners' training and perceived competence in inclusive education for students with special needs. We developed a survey aimed to gain insight into training and perceived competence. Survey results related to training suggest that teacher education and special education majors might benefit from additional training in universal design for learning, co-teaching, and flexible grouping, where school counselor majors might need more training in all categories of inclusive education. Survey results related to perceived competence results suggest that most pre-service school practitioners perceived themselves to be very capable of implementing inclusive educational practices.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education; Education; School practitioners; Pre-service

## 1 Introduction

“Inclusive education [IE] is founded on the premise that all students are provided access to all educational programs and environments” (Wray et al., 2021, para. 1).<sup>[1]</sup> IE is rooted in the principle of social

justice with a philosophy that counters the concept of separate education, which has been demonstrated to be detrimental to the academic outcomes of students especially those with special needs (Chitiyo et al., 2024).<sup>[2]</sup> The success of IE is largely dependent

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on attitudes, competencies, and commitment of educators as well as the support systems in place to address the diverse learning needs of students (Sharma et al., 2021;<sup>[3]</sup> Wray et al., 2022<sup>[1]</sup>). Furthermore, IE requires school practitioners (i.e., teachers, school counselors, school psychologists) to understand the uniqueness and diversity of individual students (Sirem & Çatal, 2023).<sup>[4]</sup>

Students with special needs are diverse and are often unmet in regular education classrooms unless they are provided with specific accommodations (Heward, 2022).<sup>[5]</sup> Students with exceptional learning needs include students with special needs, disabilities, and gifted (Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, 2002;<sup>[6]</sup> Reis et al., 2014<sup>[7]</sup>). On the contrary, culturally diverse students experience multifaceted issues surrounding racial, linguistic, and socio-economic factors, which could result in disproportionate representation in inclusive practices (de Barona & Barona, 2006;<sup>[8]</sup> Ford et al., 2014<sup>[9]</sup>). Therefore, Ford et al. (2014)<sup>[9]</sup> mentioned that school practitioners should acknowledge the intersection between exceptionality and cultural diversity to make informed decisions when considering inclusive practices.

Inclusive settings can support students with special needs and their families with culturally relevant resources and appropriate instruction in various formats tailored to students' needs to improve academic achievement (Ford et al., 2014).<sup>[9]</sup> School practitioners require proper training to work with students of all backgrounds and training to enhance their attitudes, perceptions, and confidence in working with students with special needs (Allen, 2017).<sup>[10]</sup>

## **Educational Laws**

IE became a global agenda after the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action adopted in 1994 in Spain (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization; UNESCO, 1994).<sup>[11]</sup> The Salamanca Framework required governments across the globe to develop and enact legislation that promoted the education of students with special needs in regular education classrooms (UNESCO, 1994).<sup>[11]</sup> The guiding principle of the framework was that

all schools provide accommodations to all students regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and linguistic conditions that may affect their educational performance (UNESCO, 1994).<sup>[11]</sup>

The United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; CRPD; 2006)<sup>[12]</sup> in 2006, which serves as a powerful human rights legislation that reaffirms that all people with disabilities should enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Article 24 of the CRPD focuses on education and it prioritizes by acknowledging that, “individual support measures... provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion” (CRPD, 2006, p 15).<sup>[12]</sup> These two international frameworks have given the implementation of inclusive education much needed traction.

The United States was a signatory to the Salamanca Framework for Action and it also ratified the CRPD in 2009. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) formerly known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHCA) guaranteed the right to a free appropriate public education to all children with disabilities in the least restrictive environments (Hicks-Monroe, 2011).<sup>[13]</sup> The law has been amended a few times to align with the principles of the Salamanca Framework and CRPD and each amendment has strengthened the need for inclusive education (Heward, 2022).<sup>[5]</sup> An estimated 7 million students with special needs receive special education services under different disability categories and over 60% receive instructional services in general education classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).<sup>[14]</sup>

## **Inclusive Education Training**

Training is essential to school practitioner preparedness to design, deliver, and evaluate IE. Research has shown school practitioners' attitudes toward IE to be a strong predictor of the integration of inclusive practices in their teaching (Rosado-Castellano et al., 2022;<sup>[15]</sup> Sharma et al., 2021;<sup>[3]</sup> Wray et al., 2022;<sup>[1]</sup> Yada et al., 2022<sup>[16]</sup>). Yet, Triviño-Amigo et al. (2023<sup>[17]</sup>) found that secondary-education teachers

perceived their initial training as inadequate in preparing them to service students with special needs. Similarly, separate studies have found that teachers and school counselors who received disability-focused training possess more positive perceptions and confidence in IE practices compared to those without training (Goodman-Scott et al., 2019;<sup>[18]</sup> Rosado-Castellano et al., 2022;<sup>[15]</sup> Wray et al., 2022<sup>[1]</sup>). These studies highlight the importance of adequate preparedness to implement IE practices and the need for initial and ongoing training.

Limited knowledge, experiences, and skills are a common denominator in research surrounding school practitioners' preparedness to support students with special needs and employ IE practices (Goodman-Scott et al., 2019;<sup>[18]</sup> Parikh Foxx et al., 2022;).<sup>[19]</sup> Chitiyo and Brinda (2018)<sup>[20]</sup> found that of a sample of 77 teachers from the Northeastern region of the United States had reported limited knowledge on how to implement inclusive educational practices such as co-teaching despite having an understanding of the practice. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that school counselors reported limited access to training has hindered their ability to support students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Parikh Foxx et al., 2022).<sup>[19]</sup> Goodman-Scott et al. (2019)<sup>[18]</sup> found that on average the school counselors in their sample reported feeling underprepared to work with students with disabilities in inclusive settings. These findings are concerning considering that school practitioners work with students with disabilities in various inclusive settings. Research indicates that many school practitioners complete their training programs without adequate preparation in inclusive educational practices (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018).<sup>[20]</sup>

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

This study aims to understand pre-service school practitioners' (i.e., school counselors, special education teachers, and teachers) training and perceived competence to support students with special needs in inclusive settings. Most of the research on IE has focused on in-service teachers while neglecting other school personnel and pre-service trainees. This study aims to share insights into the training and perceived

competence of pre-service school practitioners in IE. This study addresses the following research questions: (a) How do pre-service school practitioners perceive the extent that their training program covered inclusive education? (b) How do pre-service school practitioners perceive their competence in utilizing inclusive education concepts?

## **2 Methodology**

The aim of this pilot study is to understand the perceived training and competence of pre-service school practitioners in IE. This study was approved by an Institutional Review Board before data collection began.

### **Procedures**

Data were collected from a sample of school practitioner preparation programs (i.e., school counseling, special education, and teacher education) at a large university in the Southeastern part of the United States via an internet survey. The invitation to participate in the study was sent to all school practitioner preparation program directors across the campus. Pre-service school practitioners volunteered to participate in the study after reading the invitation email cover letter, reading the informed consent, and electronically signing the informed consent before they could complete the survey. All participants who completed the survey were eligible for their choice of a \$5 Amazon or Starbucks e-gift card. Program directors were contacted after two weeks to resend the invitation to participants. Data were collected for four weeks from March 4, 2024 until April 5, 2024.

### **Instrumentation**

This study used a survey design to collect data about pre-service school practitioners' perceived training and competence in IE. The survey consisted of 36 questions with a demographic section that asked seven questions and an inclusive education section that asked eight questions about training and 21 questions about competence for a total of 29 questions. The inclusive education training and competence questions were based on the work of Fowler

et al. (2019).<sup>[21]</sup> The training questions focused on (a) progress monitoring, (b) differential instruction, (c) universal design for learning (UDL), (d) high-leverage practices, (e) co-teaching, (f) flexible grouping, and (g) behavioral management. The competence questions focused on (a) instructional practices, (b) culturally responsive practices, (c) accommodations, (d) data, and (e) behavioral management.

The inclusive education questionnaire was developed for the purposes of this study by the research team. The research team consisted of two school counselor educator faculty with experience training school counselors about inclusive education, one special educator faculty with experience training school counselors and teachers about inclusive education, and one counselor educator faculty with knowledge and experience in survey methods. The survey was reviewed by two experts in inclusive education. One special educator professor and one director of special education services in public schools.

The inclusive education questionnaire development consisted of six steps. The first step consisted of the lead and second authors meeting to create a list of 30 questions to assess for perceived training and competence of inclusive education. After the lead and second authors came to consensus on the questions, the second step consisted of the third and fourth authors independently reviewing the questions and offering suggestions and edits. The third step consisted of a team meeting to come to consensus on the questions. The fourth step consisted of sending the agreed upon questions to two independent reviewers who were experts in inclusive education. The expert independent reviewers listed suggestions for how to improve wording and recommended removing one question due to redundancy. The fifth step consisted of the lead and second authors meeting to discuss the expert independent reviewer feedback and make the necessary edits. The lead and second authors removed one question and reworded seven based on the feedback. The final step consisted of a team meeting to come to consensus on the edits.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using SPSS 29.0.1.1. The

first research question assessed, how do pre-service school practitioners perceive the extent that their training program covered inclusive education concepts? We used frequencies and percentages to determine the extent that pre-service school practitioners perceived their training programs covered inclusive education concepts. The second research question assessed, how do pre-service school practitioners perceive their competence in utilizing inclusive education concepts? We used frequencies and percentages to determine the extent that pre-service school practitioners perceived their competence in using inclusive education concepts and practices.

## **3 Results**

The results of this study were from an internet survey at a large university in the Southeastern part of the United States. The survey was sent to all school practitioner preparation program directors and coordinators within the university.

### **Response Rate**

The survey request was sent to program directors and coordinators with a request to send the survey to all students in their program. Based on university enrollment numbers, it is estimated that the school practitioners preparation programs across the campus have an enrollment of around 700 students. We received 75 responses (10.7% response rate) after the four weeks. Data were reviewed and responses that were less than 75% complete were deleted using a listwise deletion. A total of 29 responses were missing more than 75% of responses. This resulted in 46 completed surveys (61% usable rate).

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of 32 (69.5%) undergraduate majors with 18 (39%) teacher education majors and 14 (30%) special education majors and 14 (30%) graduate majors with 14 (30%) school counselor majors (see Figure 1). Participants completed an average of four semesters in their training program and on average were beginning their second year in their major.

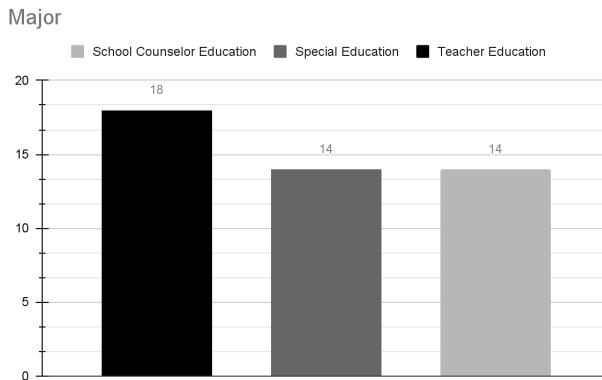


Figure 1. provides a summary of participant majors.

Participants identified as a member of one of four racial groups: 18 (39%) Black or African American, 15 (33%) White or Caucasian, 10 (22%) Hispanic or Latinx, 1 (2%) American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 2 (4%) declined to respond (see Table 1). Table 1 provides a summary of participant racial groups. Participants identified as a member of one of five gender groups: 35 (76%) female, 3 (7%) cisfemale, 6 (13%) male, 1 (2%) cismale, and 1 (2%) transmale (see Table 2). Table 2 provides a summary of participant gender groups. Participants ranged in age from 18-46 years old and 3 participants declined to respond.

Table 1. Provides a summary of participant racial groups.

Racial Group	Number of responses	Percentage
Black or African American	18	39%
White or Caucasian	15	33%
Hispanic or Latinx	10	22%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1	2%
Declined to Respond	2	4%

Table 2. Provides a summary of participant gender groups.

Gender Group	Number of responses	Percentage
Female	35	76%
Cisfemale	3	7%
Male	6	13%
Cismale	1	2%
Transmale	1	2%

## Data Analysis

The results of this study aimed to share insights into the training and perceived competence of

pre-service school practitioners in IE.

## Training

Results found that participants completed an average of two courses that covered inclusive education practices. Participants responded to a series of questions to determine the extent that their training program covered inclusive education concepts (see Figure 2). Questions asked participants the extent to which the following concepts were covered: (a) progress monitoring, (b) differential instruction, (c) universal design for learning (UDL), (d) high-leverage practices, (e) co-teaching, (f) flexible grouping, and (g) behavioral management. Figure 2 summarizes the extent to which pre-service school practitioners received the following training in inclusive education.

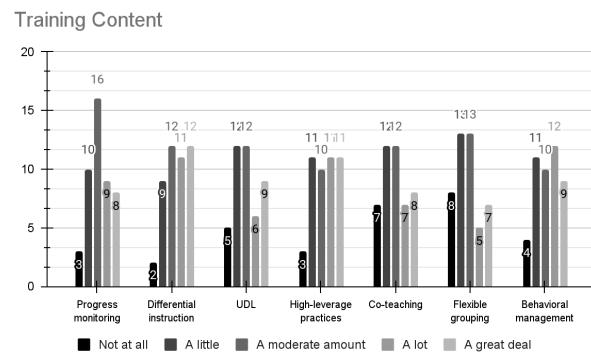


Figure 2. Summarizes the extent to which pre-service school practitioners received the following training in inclusive education.

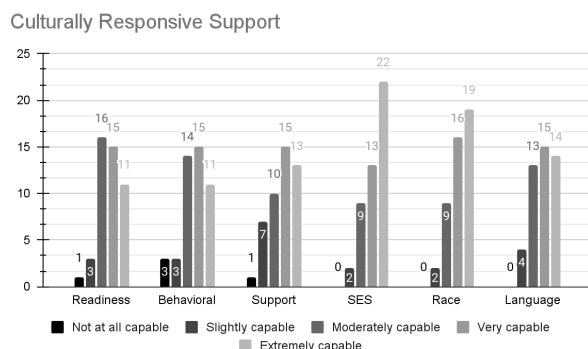
## Competence

Participants responded to a series of questions about their perceived competence in utilizing inclusive education concepts (see Figure 2). Questions asked participants to rate their perceived competence of the following concepts: (a) instructional practices, (b) culturally responsive practices, (c) accommodations, (d) data, and (e) behavioral management. Figure 2 summarizes the perceived competence of pre-service school practitioners in utilizing inclusive education concepts.

**Instructional Practices.** Questions about instructional practices were used to determine the extent to which participants rated their perceived competence

in instructional practices to promote IE. Participants responded that they perceived their competence to adjust instruction or counseling practices as 3 (6.5%) not at all capable, 5 (10.9%) slightly capable, 12 (26.1%) moderately capable, 15 (32.6%) very capable, and 11 (23.9%) extremely capable. Participants also responded that they perceived their competence to modify curriculum (i.e., teaching or counseling) as 2 (4.3%) not at all capable, 9 (19.6%) slightly capable, 12 (26.1%) moderately capable, 14 (30.4%) very capable, and 9 (19.6%) extremely capable.

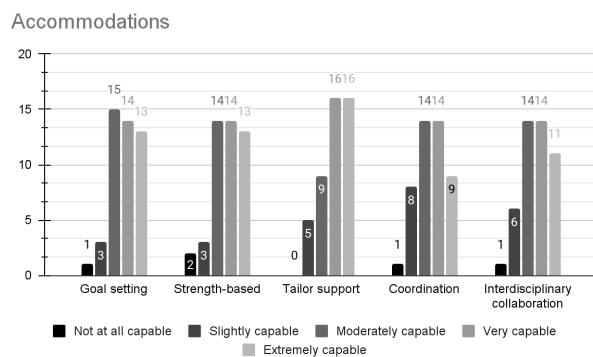
**Culturally Responsive Practices.** Questions about culturally responsive practices were used to determine the extent to which participants rated their perceived competence in culturally responsive practices with students and families to promote IE (see Figure 3). Questions asked participants the extent to which the following concepts were covered: (a) readiness, (b) behavioral management, (c) teaching/student support services, (d) working with students and families from different socio-economic (SES) backgrounds, (e) working with students and families from different racial backgrounds, and (f) working with students and families from different language backgrounds. Figure 3 summarizes the extent to which pre-service school practitioners rated their perceived competence in culturally responsive practices in promoting IE with students and families.



**Figure 3. Perceived competence of pre-service school practitioners in culturally responsive practices related to inclusive education.**

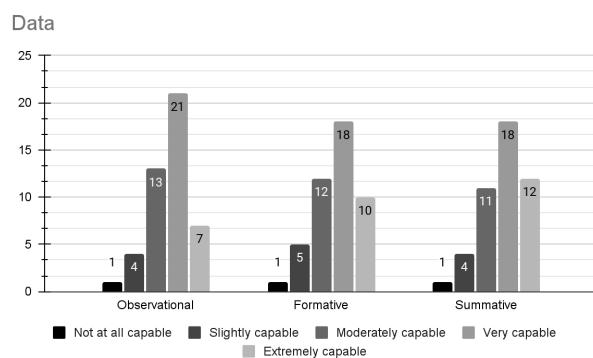
**Accommodations.** Questions about accommodations were used to determine the extent to which participants rated their perceived competence in developing and adjusting accommodations to promote

IE (see Figure 4). Questions asked participants the extent to which the following concepts were covered: (a) goal setting, (b) strength-based approaches in teaching/student support, (c) tailoring teaching/student support, (d) coordinating teaching/student supports, and (e) interdisciplinary collaboration. Figure 4 summarizes the extent to which pre-service school practitioners rated their perceived competence in developing and adjusting accommodations to promote IE.



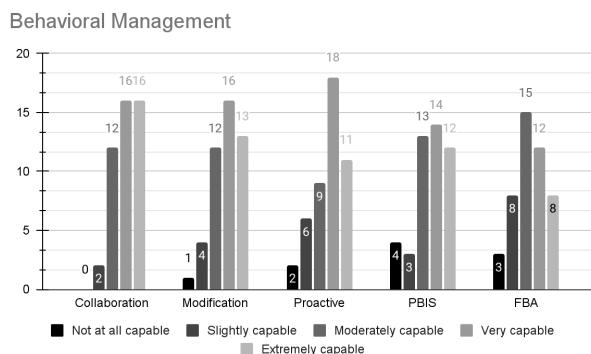
**Figure 4. Perceived competence in developing and adjusting accommodations for inclusive education among pre-service school practitioners.**

**Data.** Questions about data were used to determine the extent to which participants rated their perceived competence in using various types of data to promote IE (see Figure 5). Questions asked participants the extent to which the following concepts were covered: (a) observational, (b) formative, and (c) summative. Figure 5 summarizes the extent to which pre-service school practitioners rated their perceived competence in using data to promote IE.



**Figure 5. Perceived competence in using different types of data to support inclusive education among pre-service school practitioners.**

**Behavioral Management.** Questions about behavioral management were used to determine the extent to which participants rated their perceived competence in behavioral management approaches to promote IE (see Figure 6). Questions asked participants the extent to which the following concepts were covered: (a) behavioral management collaboration, (b) behavioral management modifications, (c) proactive behavioral management, (d) Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and (e) Functional Behavioral Analysis (FBA). Figure 6 summarizes the extent to which pre-service school practitioners rated their perceived competence in using behavioral management approaches to promote IE.



**Figure 6. Perceived competence in behavioral management approaches for supporting inclusive education among pre-service school practitioners.**

## 4 Discussion

IE is fundamental to promoting accessible educational programs and services for students with special needs (Sharma et al., 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). Existing research has demonstrated that successful implementation of IE is consistent with attitudes, knowledge, skills, and actions of school practitioners (Sharma et al., 2021;<sup>[3]</sup> Wray et al., 2022<sup>[1]</sup>). Researchers have explored these concepts from the experiences of in-service school practitioners (Parikh Foxx et al., 2022;<sup>[19]</sup> Rosado-Castellano et al., 2022;<sup>[15]</sup> Triviño-Amigo et al., 2023),<sup>[17]</sup> yet there is limited research on the training and perceived competence of pre-service school practitioners. Understanding this discrepancy is important since pre-service training has been con-

sistently identified as a predictor of the success of different inclusive educational practices (Pinkelman et al., 2015).<sup>[22]</sup> This study provides school practitioner educator programs with valuable information informing program improvements and adoption of innovative educational models training better prepared educators.

### Statement of Principle Findings

Understanding the training experience and perceived competence of IE will help school practitioner educators target specific areas to address in curriculum development. Preparing pre-service school practitioners with the necessary attitudes, knowledge, skills, and actions will help to prepare them to meet the needs of diverse learning by creating a supporting learning environment. This study's results provided insights into the training and perceived competence of pre-service school practitioners. It is important to note that perceived competence might not equate to actual competence.

### Training

Pre-service training is foundational to IE (Pinkelman et al., 2015).<sup>[22]</sup> This study found that undergraduate majors (i.e., teacher education and special education) and graduate majors (i.e., school counselor education) reported differences in their training of IE principles. Undergraduate majors reported receiving a lot to a great deal of training in (a) progress monitoring (44%), (b) differential instruction (59%), (c) UDL (41%), (d) high-leverage practices (56%), (e) co-teaching (38%), (f) flexible grouping (31%), and (g) behavioral management (47%). Graduate majors reported receiving not at all to a little training in (a) progress monitoring (57%), (b) differential instruction (64%), (c) UDL (71%), (d) high-leverage practices (71%), (e) co-teaching (64%), (f) flexible grouping (71%), and (g) behavioral management (50%). This suggests that teacher education and special education majors might need more training in UDL, co-teaching, and flexible grouping, where school counselor majors might need more training in all categories. School counselors work with all students to achieve their fullest potential (American

School Counselor Association, 2022),<sup>[23]</sup> yet this pilot study suggests that pre-service school counselors might not receive training in IE practices to support the development of all learners. More research is needed to determine the extent of IE training for pre-service school practitioners.

### **Competence**

Attitudes toward IE is a strong predictor of the use of inclusive practices (Rosado-Castellano et al., 2022;<sup>[15]</sup> Sharma et al., 2021;<sup>[3]</sup> Wray et al., 2022;<sup>[1]</sup> Yada et al., 2022<sup>[16]</sup>). Understanding perceived competence can be valuable for educators of school practitioners as they work to develop attitudes, knowledge, skills, and actions that support IE. This study found that pre-service school practitioners perceived their competence in culturally responsive supports as extremely competent in supporting students and families from different SES backgrounds (47.8%) and from different ethnic or racial backgrounds (41.3%) despite only 23.9% of participants reported feeling extremely capable in their readiness to work with diverse students. Recognizing culturally responsive practices in IE can help enhance academic achievement (Ford et al., 2014).<sup>[9]</sup>

### **Strength of the Study**

A strength of this study is the focus on pre-service school practitioners. Identifying training and perceived competence provides school practitioner educators with insights into areas that might need more support in training and preparation prior to starting as an in-service practitioner. The results of this study suggested that teacher education and special education trainees need additional training in co-teaching and flexible grouping, while school counselor trainees need additional training in (a) progress monitoring, (b) differential instruction, (c) UDL, (d) high-leverage practices, (e) co-teaching, (f) flexible grouping, and (g) behavioral management. This information can help with supporting targeted training to advance attitudes, knowledge, skills, and actions in IE practices.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study is that it is a pilot study.

A pilot study will help with developing the survey and understanding more about the nature of training and perceived competence but may not be an accurate representation of IE training or perceived competence from a larger sample. Additional research is needed to support the development of the survey.

### **Unanswered Questions and Future Research**

The results of this study offer insights into additional research questions. Future research could examine IE practices with other school practitioners (e.g., administrators, school psychologists). Future researchers could also expand the study to a random sample of school practitioners programs across the US. Lastly, future researchers could conduct an exploratory factor analysis of the survey for additional development.

## **5 Conclusion**

IE is a complex process that requires school practitioners to have appropriate attitudes, knowledge, skills, and actions to design, implement, and evaluate differentiated instructional practices (Sharma et al., 2021;<sup>[3]</sup> Wray et al., 2022<sup>[1]</sup>). School practitioner educators are responsible for ensuring pre-service school practitioners are prepared to meet these demands to support all learners. This pilot study provided initial insights into the training and perceived competence of pre-service school practitioners. Preliminary findings suggest that not all school practitioners are equally trained in IE and there are inconsistencies in perceived competencies of readiness and working with different SES and racial and ethnic backgrounds.

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