

# Educational priorities from the lens of school leaders: Shaping NEUST-COED extension programs for General Natividad District, Nueva Ecija

Illumin, Reynaldo J.

*Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, Philippines*

De Guzman, Donna D. ✉

*Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, Philippines* ([donnadeguzman@gmail.com](mailto:donnadeguzman@gmail.com))



ISSN: 2243-7703  
Online ISSN: 2243-7711

OPEN ACCESS

**Received:** 7 February 2026  
**Available Online:** 15 May 2026

**Revised:** 13 May 2026  
**DOI:** 10.5861/ijrse.2026.26207

**Accepted:** 14 May 2026

## ***Abstract***

This study aimed to identify the priority areas for NEUST-COED extension programs based on the assessed needs of school heads in the General Natividad District, Nueva Ecija. Utilizing a descriptive research design, data were collected from principals and head teachers through a structured online survey. The study was anchored on Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), the ARAL Program, and relevant DepEd orders promoting inclusive and equitable education. Results revealed high to very high levels of need in key domains: early literacy instruction, family engagement, reading remediation, inclusive education, and mental health support. Specifically, there is a strong demand for capacity-building on foundational reading skills, contextualized literacy materials, and intervention strategies for learners with disabilities. School heads also emphasized the importance of psychosocial support and social-emotional learning for both teachers and students. These findings highlight the necessity of designing localized, responsive, and sustainable extension programs tailored to the diverse needs of schools. The study recommends a collaborative approach between NEUST-COED and local education stakeholders to implement targeted interventions. Addressing these priority areas is crucial to strengthening basic education outcomes, promoting inclusive practices, and supporting the holistic development of learners in the district.

***Keywords:*** literacy development, inclusive education, psychosocial support, extension programs, school leadership

## **Educational priorities from the lens of school leaders: Shaping NEUST-COED extension programs for General Natividad District, Nueva Ecija**

### **1. Introduction**

Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) is a vital foundation for national development, particularly in the Philippine context. The Department of Education (DepEd) advances this goal through major policy initiatives such as the Learning Recovery and Continuity Plan (DepEd Order No. 13, s. 2023), the MATATAG Curriculum, and the ARAL Program (Access, Reform, and Accelerate Learning). These reforms collectively underscore the importance of foundational literacy, inclusive practices, and learner well-being as key components of quality basic education. These are supported by national legislation, including Republic Act No. 10533 or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, and Republic Act No. 11650, which both affirm the state's responsibility to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all, especially for marginalized and vulnerable learners.

Despite these progressive reforms, schools continue to grapple with persistent learning gaps, inconsistent access to quality instruction, and limited support for learners with diverse needs. School leaders and teachers face daily challenges in strengthening reading comprehension, numeracy skills, and inclusive classroom practices—especially in resource-constrained contexts. Addressing these gaps requires a deeper understanding of the ground-level realities that educators encounter, including the specific needs of learners across different grade levels and learner groups.

As a teacher education institution, the Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology College of Education (NEUST-COED) recognizes its vital role in supporting DepEd schools through research-based and needs-responsive extension programs. It is both fitting and imperative for institutions like NEUST-COED to lend a helping hand to public school teachers and learners, particularly in the areas of literacy development, inclusive education, and psychosocial support. In this light, the present study was conducted to explore the educational priorities of school heads in the General Natividad District, Nueva Ecija, with the ultimate goal of shaping relevant and sustainable extension initiatives aligned with the most pressing needs of the schools they serve.

**Statement of the Problem** - This study aims to identify the educational priorities of school leaders in the General Natividad District in order to guide the development of NEUST-COED's extension programs. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the profile of the respondents in terms of position/designation?
- How do school heads describe the educational needs of teachers handling primary-level learners?
- How do school heads assess the professional development needs of teachers handling intermediate-level learners?
- What priority areas may be identified from school heads' perspectives to guide the design of NEUST-COED extension programs that support teachers

### **2. Methodology**

**Research Design** - This study employed a descriptive survey research design to gather data on the educational priorities as perceived by school leaders in the General Mamerto Natividad District, Nueva Ecija. The design was appropriate for obtaining quantitative and qualitative insights into current needs related to literacy, inclusion, and psychosocial support, thereby guiding the development of relevant extension programs.

**Research Locale** - The study was conducted in the municipality of General Mamerto Natividad, located in

Nueva Ecija, Philippines. The respondents were public school heads including principals and head teachers within the Department of Education (DepEd) schools in the district.

**Instrumentation** - The primary data-gathering tool was a structured survey questionnaire designed by the researchers, based on key indicators of educational needs aligned with DepEd priorities and inclusive education frameworks. The instrument included sections on literacy gaps, inclusive practices, support for learners with special needs, and psychosocial support. The questionnaire was reviewed by education experts for content validity and clarity before distribution.

**Data Collection Procedure and Ethical Considerations** - Data were collected through an online survey using Google Forms. The link to the questionnaire was sent to the official emails or online communication channels of the participating school heads. Prior to participation, respondents were informed of the study's purpose, assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and provided with a consent form. Participation was voluntary, and no personally identifiable information was collected, ensuring adherence to ethical research standards.

**Mode of Analysis** - The responses were tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Mean scores were computed to determine the central tendencies of responses, while percentages were used to describe the distribution of categorical data. The results were interpreted with verbal descriptions to highlight key patterns and inform practical recommendations for NEUST-COED's extension initiatives.

### 3. Results and discussion

**Table 1**

*Position/Designation of Respondents*

Position/Designation	Frequency	Percentage
Head Teacher III	4	20.00%
Principal I	7	35.00%
Principal II	8	40.00%
Principal IV	1	5.00%
Total	20	100.00%

A total of 20 school heads participated in the survey. Of these, 40% were Principal II, 35% were Principal I, 20% were Head Teacher III, and 5% were Principal IV. The data show that the majority of respondents were in Principal positions (80%), suggesting a wide representation of school administrators at various levels of school leadership.

**Table 2**

*Educational Needs of Teachers Handling Primary-level Learners*

Area of Need	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Teaching phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondence, and decoding	4.00	High Need
Teaching beginning reading skills in K to 2 learners	4.00	High Need
Providing early reading intervention for at-risk pupils	3.75	High Need
Using storytelling, big books, and shared reading techniques	3.63	High Need
Incorporating songs, rhymes, and movement into literacy	3.63	High Need
Strengthening parent-teacher communication and collaboration	4.00	High Need
Partnering with barangays for early learning programs	4.13	High Need
Empowering parents to support holistic child development	4.25	Very High Need
Promoting fine and gross motor skills in daily routines	3.50	Moderate Need
Designing active play and movement-based lessons	3.50	Moderate Need
Screening for motor coordination or physical developmental delays	3.75	High Need
Providing materials that encourage grip, balance, and strength	3.38	Moderate Need

The findings revealed that school heads in the General Mamerto Natividad District perceived consistently **high to very high needs** in key areas of early literacy and child development for primary-level learners. Notably, the highest-rated item was *empowering parents to support holistic child development* ( $M = 4.25$ ), emphasizing the school leaders' recognition of the home environment's vital role in foundational learning. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which underscores the importance of the microsystem particularly the family in shaping a child's cognitive and emotional development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Similarly, research

by Epstein (2001) advocates for strong school-family partnerships to enhance early learning outcomes, especially in marginalized communities.

High mean scores were also observed in items related to *teaching phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondence, and beginning reading* (M = 4.00), reinforcing the importance of early literacy as the cornerstone of lifelong learning. According to the Department of Education’s “Every Child a Reader” Program (DepEd Order No. 14, s. 2016), these skills are foundational for reading fluency and comprehension, particularly in K to 3 learners. UNESCO (2016) also highlights that delays in acquiring decoding and reading readiness skills in the early grades are difficult to remediate in later years, reinforcing the urgent need for interventions at this stage.

The moderately rated areas, particularly those concerning **fine and gross motor development** (e.g., *providing materials that encourage grip, balance, and strength*, M = 3.38), may indicate a relative gap in awareness or emphasis among school leaders. However, the Philippine Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) framework recognizes physical development as a key domain alongside cognitive and socio-emotional skills (Council for the Welfare of Children, 2011). Developmentally appropriate practices, including movement-based learning and active play, support not only motor coordination but also attention, memory, and self-regulation (Tominey & McClelland, 2011).

Finally, items such as *partnering with barangays for early learning programs* and *strengthening parent-teacher communication* received high ratings, which reflects a broader understanding of the need for **community-based and intersectoral approaches** to early education. As suggested by Bautista and Tan (2018), sustainable early learning initiatives in the Philippines thrive best when there is active collaboration among schools, families, and local stakeholders.

**Table 2**  
*Educational Needs of Teachers Handling Intermediate-level Learners*

Item No.	Area of Need	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1	Designing effective reading and remediation activities for struggling learners	4.21	Very High Need
2	Conducting reading tutorials and mentoring non-readers in school or community	4.13	High Need
3	Engaging families in home-based literacy support (e.g., read-aloud, vocabulary games)	4.08	High Need
4	Teaching reading comprehension, inferencing, and reflective thinking	4.17	High Need
5	Using real-life and functional literacy tasks (signs, forms, local texts) across subjects	4.00	High Need
6	Diagnosing reading difficulties and designing intervention plans	3.96	High Need
7	Teaching content-area reading in Science, Math, and Araling Panlipunan	3.88	High Need
8	Developing reading materials and assessments for intermediate and upper grades	4.00	High Need
9	Additional community-based learning spaces to support remediation (literacy and numeracy)	4.08	High Need
10	Collaboration with barangays to set up learning hubs for children	4.00	High Need
11	Supporting transition from MTB-MLE to Filipino in Grade 3	3.92	High Need
12	Training in scaffolding reading and writing in Filipino	4.04	High Need
13	Creating contextualized Filipino reading materials	3.96	High Need
14	Conducting Filipino creative writing workshops for learners	4.08	High Need
15	Providing classroom-based social and emotional learning (SEL) integration strategies	4.13	High Need
16	Conducting mental health first aid training for teachers	4.00	High Need
17	Delivering wellness programs and debriefing sessions for teachers	3.88	High Need
18	Running parenting workshops on resilience and emotional regulation	3.92	High Need
19	Promoting anti-bullying and peer support systems	4.13	High Need
20	Facilitating classroom guidance activities appropriate for elementary pupils (e.g., self-awareness, kindness, career dreams)	4.25	Very High Need
21	Coordinating with school guidance staff for referrals and emotional support	3.92	High Need
22	Designing and implementation of a school-wide guidance program (e.g., career week, mental health month, child protection campaigns)	3.88	High Need

The results reveal that the school heads perceived a **very high need** in “Facilitating classroom guidance activities appropriate for elementary pupils (e.g., self-awareness, kindness, career dreams)” (M = 4.25),

highlighting the importance of fostering personal and socio-emotional development at the intermediate level. This aligns with the emphasis of **DepEd Order No. 21, s. 2019**, which promotes the integration of life skills, values education, and career awareness even in the early grades. Similarly, “Designing effective reading and remediation activities for struggling learners” (M = 4.21), “Teaching reading comprehension, inferencing, and reflective thinking” (M = 4.17), and “Promoting anti-bullying and peer support systems” (M = 4.13) were rated as high to very high needs. These findings underscore the pressing concern of addressing reading gaps and learner well-being in upper elementary grades. According to Bernardo et al. (2020), struggling readers in the intermediate level require structured, contextualized support to improve fluency and comprehension skills essential for academic success across content areas.

Moreover, school leaders recognized the significance of **mental health and parental engagement**, with high ratings for “Providing classroom-based SEL integration strategies” (M = 4.13), “Conducting mental health first aid training for teachers” (M = 4.00), and “Running parenting workshops on resilience and emotional regulation” (M = 3.92). This mirrors the growing recognition of emotional wellness as a foundation for learning, as promoted by WHO (2021) and echoed in the Philippine Basic Education Development Plan (BEDP) 2030. Lastly, high ratings were also given to community-driven initiatives such as “Collaboration with barangays to set up learning hubs” (M = 4.00) and “Conducting reading tutorials and mentoring non-readers” (M = 4.13), suggesting the need for extended learning spaces beyond the classroom. These results affirm the role of school- community partnerships, as emphasized in **UNESCO’s Education 2030 Framework**, in supporting inclusive and equitable education. In sum, the findings indicate that intermediate learners require holistic interventions that go beyond academics—addressing literacy, emotional health, family involvement, and community support. These needs must inform extension programs to ensure they are context-responsive and impact-driven.

**Table 4**  
*Capacity-building Needs of Teachers Handling Learners with Special Needs*

No.	Area of Need	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1	Understanding common disabilities (ASD, ADHD, SLD, ID, etc.)	4.13	High Need
2	Differentiating instruction for learners with ASD, ADHD, ID, and SLD	4.08	High Need
3	Using multi-sensory approaches for concept mastery	4.08	High Need
4	Creating SPED Resource Corners	3.92	High Need
5	Organizing advocacy campaigns for inclusive education	4.08	High Need
6	Building awareness on disability rights and child protection	4.00	High Need
7	Engaging local leaders and stakeholders in child advocacy	4.08	High Need
8	Promoting inclusive practices in barangay events and settings	3.92	High Need
9	Advocating for child rights and anti-bullying policies in LGU	4.17	Very High Need
10	Modifying seating, lighting, and materials for diverse learners	4.04	High Need
11	Creating calming corners and sensory spaces in schools	4.04	High Need
12	Posting visual schedules, behavior cues, and accessible classroom routines	4.04	High Need
13	Organizing clutter-free, low-distraction areas for learners with sensory needs	4.04	High Need
14	Ensuring barrier-free access and inclusive layout for mobility-impaired learners	4.00	High Need
15	Conducting mental health awareness and psychosocial sessions for parents of learners with disabilities	4.04	High Need
16	Facilitating support groups and counseling circles for caregivers	4.04	High Need
17	Training parents on self-care, stress regulation, and managing burnout	4.00	High Need
18	Partnering with guidance counselors and LGUs to refer parents to support services	3.88	High Need
19	Promoting family-centered approaches in IEP planning and home- school collaboration	3.92	High Need

The overall findings reflect a consistently high level of need across all listed areas, with the highest-rated item being the need to advocate for child rights and anti-bullying policies at the LGU level (M = 4.17, Very High Need). This indicates school leaders' strong desire to reinforce inclusive and protective environments beyond the school setting. Core instructional areas such as understanding disabilities, differentiated instruction, and multi-sensory approaches all received high ratings (M = 4.08–4.13), reflecting the demand for more capacity-building in inclusive pedagogy. According to Tomlinson and Strickland (2005), differentiated instruction is critical in accommodating the diverse needs of learners with exceptionalities, which this study’s respondents clearly affirm.

Environmental adaptations like calming corners, visual cues, and low-distraction areas ( $M = 4.04$ ) are also viewed as essential. These findings are consistent with studies by Boutot and Myles (2016), which highlight the significance of sensory-friendly and visually supportive classrooms for learners with autism and sensory processing challenges. Additionally, mental health and parental support aspects including self-care training for parents, counseling, and family-centered IEP planning all received mean scores of 4.00 and above. This aligns with global and local calls for wraparound support systems for children with disabilities (WHO, 2021; UNESCO, 2020), recognizing that inclusive education extends to the well-being of the child's immediate caregivers. The data underscores the pressing need for NEUST-COED to offer inclusive education training, school-community partnerships, and parent-focused psychosocial programs as part of its extension services. Such interventions would directly address the needs perceived by school leaders and create a more enabling, responsive learning environment for children with special needs.

#### **4. Priority Areas for NEUST-COED Extension Programs**

The data gathered from school heads in General Natividad District revealed key areas of need across various domains, particularly in literacy development, inclusive education, and psychosocial support. These findings directly inform the priority areas that may guide the design of NEUST-COED extension programs. The following priority areas are identified based on items with high to very high need ratings (Mean scores ranging from 4.00 to 4.25):

##### ***Early Literacy Instruction and Family Engagement***

- Teaching foundational reading skills in K to 2 learners, including phonological awareness and decoding.
- Strengthening parent-teacher communication and involving families in early literacy activities such as read-alouds and vocabulary games.
- Partnering with barangays and community sectors for early learning initiatives and literacy promotion (Bautista & Tan, 2018; Epstein, 2001).

##### ***Remediation and Contextualized Literacy Across Grade Levels***

- Conducting reading tutorials for non-readers and struggling learners.
- Using real-life and functional literacy tasks across subjects (e.g., Science, Math, Araling Panlipunan).
- Developing localized Filipino reading materials and integrating reading comprehension and inferencing (Bernardo et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2016).

##### ***Inclusive Education and Disability Awareness***

- Understanding and differentiating instruction for learners with ASD, ADHD, SLD, and intellectual disabilities.
- Creating inclusive classroom environments, SPED resource corners, and accessible school facilities.
- Promoting inclusive practices in barangay events and advocating disability rights in LGU activities (Boutot & Myles, 2016; UNESCO, 2020).

##### ***Mental Health and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)***

- Conducting mental health awareness sessions and first aid training for teachers.
- Implementing classroom-based SEL strategies and facilitating school guidance activities focused on empathy, self-awareness, and resilience.

- Supporting parents through psychosocial services, counseling circles, and self-care training (World Health Organization, 2021; Tominey & McClelland, 2011).

## 5. Summary

This study assessed the perceived educational needs of learners at the primary, intermediate, and special needs levels, as identified by school heads in the General Mamerto Natividad District. The results revealed that across all three groups, school leaders consistently expressed high to very high levels of need in multiple domains of early education, literacy development, inclusive education, and psychosocial support. For primary-level learners, high needs were identified in the areas of early literacy instruction, family engagement, and community collaboration, with the highest priority placed on empowering parents for holistic child development. Moderately rated needs, particularly in fine and gross motor skills, suggest areas requiring increased awareness and integration into instructional design. At the intermediate level, very high needs emerged in facilitating socio-emotional learning and guidance activities, as well as addressing reading remediation. School heads also acknowledged the importance of mental health programs, community-based interventions, and family participation in sustaining academic progress and learner well-being. For learners with special needs, the findings showed uniformly high needs in instructional differentiation, environmental accommodations, advocacy, and parental support systems. A very high need was particularly noted in advocating for child rights and anti-bullying policies at the LGU level, indicating an extended view of inclusion beyond classroom strategies.

**Recommendations** - Based on the results, the following recommendations are offered for consideration by NEUST-College of Education (COED), education stakeholders, and local education units:

### *Design and implement targeted extension programs*

- Develop and deploy training modules on early literacy, reading intervention, and differentiated instruction tailored to primary and intermediate levels.
- Provide capability-building for inclusive education, focusing on classroom accommodations, multi-sensory strategies, and special needs awareness.

### *Promote family engagement and parenting support:*

- Conduct parenting workshops on holistic child development, mental health, resilience, and behavior management, especially for families with children with disabilities.
- Support family-centered planning in IEP formulation and strengthen communication channels between schools and homes.

### *Strengthen community-based learning environments:*

- Partner with barangays to establish learning hubs, remedial reading centers, and inclusive play areas.
- Expand collaboration with LGUs for policy advocacy related to child protection, anti-bullying, and access to services for learners with special needs.

### *Institutionalize mental health and SEL initiatives:*

- Train teachers in SEL integration, mental health first aid, and classroom guidance activities.
- Coordinate with guidance counselors and local agencies to offer psychosocial support for learners, parents, and school personnel.

*Sustain research and policy feedback loops:*

- Use the study's results to inform the design of NEUST COED's extension services and teacher preparation programs.
- Encourage follow-up research to explore implementation gaps and assess the effectiveness of interventions in the identified high-need areas.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings indicate that educational leaders perceive significant and diverse needs among learners at different developmental stages. Core academic competencies such as early reading, comprehension, and contextualized instruction remain foundational. However, equally prioritized are non-academic dimensions, including mental health, family engagement, inclusive practices, and partnerships with barangays and local government units. These results highlight that holistic education cannot be achieved through classroom instruction alone. Instead, a whole-child, whole-school, and whole-community approach is essential particularly in resource-constrained or marginalized settings. Strengthening the capacity of educators, parents, and communities is crucial for delivering equitable, inclusive, and learner-centered education.

**Author AI Use Disclosure** - The authors declare that generative AI tools (CoPilot and Gemini Ai) were used in a limited and supervisory capacity during the preparation of this manuscript titled "*Breaking Barriers to Inclusion: A Study on the Need for an Inclusive Learning Resource Center in Palayan City.*" These tools were employed specifically to improve readability, refine the language, and structure the project narrative. After using these tools, the authors reviewed, edited, and verified the content as needed. The authors maintain full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and original contributions of this work.

## 7. References

- Bautista, A., & Tan, C. (2018). Early childhood education in the Philippines: Strengthening intersectoral partnerships. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education*, 12(1), 15–34.
- Bernardo, A. B. I., Salanga, M. G. C., & Valerio, P. C. (2020). Reading remediation for struggling Filipino readers: Toward responsive and sustainable interventions. *The Asia Pacific Education Researcher*, 29(1), 45–56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-019-00477-x>
- Boutot, E. A., & Myles, B. S. (2016). *Autism spectrum disorders: Foundations, characteristics, and effective strategies*. Pearson Education.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Council for the Welfare of Children. (2011). *Philippine Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) checklist*.
- Department of Education. (2016). DepEd Order No. 14, s. 2016: Policy guidelines on the national assessment of student learning for the K to 12 Basic Education Program.
- Department of Education. (2019). Policy guidelines on the implementation of the Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Program for the K to 12 Basic Education Program (DepEd Order No. 21, s. 2019). <https://www.deped.gov.ph>
- Department of Education. (2022). *Basic Education Development Plan 2030*. <https://www.deped.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/BEDP-2030.pdf>
- Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Westview Press.
- Tominey, S. L., & McClelland, M. M. (2011). Red light, purple light: Findings from a randomized trial using circle time games to improve behavioral self-regulation in preschool. *Early Education and Development*, 22(3), 489–519.
- Tomlinson, C. A., & Strickland, C. A. (2005). *Differentiation in practice: A resource guide for differentiating curriculum, grades 5–9*. ASCD.

- UNESCO. (2016). If you don't understand, how can you learn? Global education monitoring report.  
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656>
- UNESCO. (2017). Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656>
- UNESCO. (2020). Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education – All means all.  
<https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2020/inclusion>
- World Health Organization. (2021). Guidance on community mental health services: Promoting person-centred and rights-based approaches. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240025707>
- World Health Organization. (2021). Mental health and COVID-19: Early evidence of the pandemic's impact.  
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240022430>

