

Lived Experiences of Early Childhood Teaching Interns in a Flexible Learning Environment

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Abstract: In the Philippines, the flexible learning environment is still considered new and developing. The course has been modified to show how teaching interns manage their experiences, whether activities or assignments are best offered on-site or online, and how they perceive such experiences. Teaching internship is an important component of teacher education; it is expected that students would have gained the necessary skills and knowledge for the internship in terms of pedagogical subject matter. The descriptive qualitative phenomenological design was used in this study to obtain the most intuitive presentation possible, direct exploration, analysis, and description of the specific phenomena used in descriptive phenomenology on the lived experience of early childhood teaching interns in a flexible learning environment. Flexible learning in education results in a variety of lived experiences for student interns throughout their teaching internship. The findings indicate that undertaking an internship in a flexible learning environment requires student interns to overcome problems and impediments caused by changes in policies and teaching-learning modalities. The student interns found their way out of the numerous problems by relying on their persevering personal character and social aid. Despite the rigorous and tough periods, they felt appreciated and valuable in the end. The findings of this study will be useful to future researchers who wish to do similar studies on the same phenomena.

Keywords: lived experiences, early childhood education, flexible learning environment, early childhood student interns, teaching internship.

1. Introduction

A flexible learning environment is required to make sure that students can develop needed skills. Learners can create more or less personalized learning paths for themselves in such a setting (Brand et al., 2013). With its clues, resources, and inherent potential, the physical, social, and cultural context of a school's environment affects teaching practices. More flexibility and individualization are priorities for higher education institutions, which they primarily achieve by incorporating new technologies into flexible or online learning settings. (Müller & Mildenberger, 2021).

In the global setting, in response to the evolving context in which the educational sector operates today, notably the increasingly diverse student body, many universities choose flexible course delivery. (Marjanovic & Orłowska, 2002). In an

Australian case study examined the ways in which teachers conceptualized and implemented changes in their practices by recognizing the flexible environment's action possibilities, and learning how to modify their practices in response to modern flexible learning environments (Deed et al., 2019).

The flexible learning environment is still considered fresh and emerging in the Philippines. Yet, the rising demand for flexible learning raises questions and challenges that merit research, particularly those that affect how effectively and efficiently teaching and learning are delivered in recently founded higher education institutions. (Alvarez, 2020). Through the use of online distant learning and the utilization of synchronous and asynchronous learning styles, A state university adopted Flexible Teaching and Learning Delivery as its method of delivering instruction (PIO, 2020).

The modification of the course demonstrates how teaching interns manage the experiences, which activities or assignments are better delivered on-site or online, and how they interpret such experiences. That shared the best practices and perspectives from teaching interns who had completed their flexible teaching internship (Hernandez, 2022). The emergence of new pedagogical paradigms, technological advancements, the need for learning environments that provide developmentally appropriate resources and support for learning will be continuously challenged by teaching and learning requirements as well as changes in students' personal circumstances (Valtonen et al., 2020).

This study aims to identify early childhood teaching interns lived experiences using flexible learning modalities in the new normal. In order to have a solid foundation on the tactics and approaches they will employ in this type of learning medium; it aids educators in providing vital online teaching training. Additionally, it provides a framework and equips student interns with the skills necessary to handle difficulties and enhance their performance in this type of learning.

A. Domain of Inquiry

This study aims to explore and describe the lived experiences of Early Childhood teaching interns in a flexible learning environment during student internship.

The study answers the research question:

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1. What are the lived experiences as a student teacher in a flexible learning environment?

B. Significance of the Study

The goal of this study is to uncover the actual experiences that early childhood teaching interns experience while working with students in a flexible learning setting. This research aims to give students and researchers a choice of options for assessing their experiences in a flexible learning environment. Also, this study supports the mentors' discussions about how to instruct in a flexible learning environment. With the help of this study, the community, in particular the teaching interns, will be better able to understand how to act as a coach for their students and lead them through the learning process in a flexible learning environment. The outcomes of this study are beneficial reference for the future researchers who would want to make any relevant investigation with the same phenomenon.

2. Review of Related Literature and Related Studies

Teaching internship is an essential component of teacher education (Marais & Corinne, 2004). Pre-service teachers frequently state that their most important pre-service schooling experience was student teaching. Many, pre-service teachers believe that during their teaching internship, they "learn to be a teacher." (Metcalf, 1991). It is intended that by the time a student completes their teaching internship, they would have acquired the skills and knowledge essential for the internship in terms of pedagogical subject matter. "Teachers teach in the way that they were taught," is why learning influences actual teaching (Schön, 1987).

The early childhood stage, which lasts from birth to the age of eight, is seen as a key time for children physical, mental, and social-emotional growth. Children begin to acquire social intelligence, character traits, and behaviors at this period as well (Jale Aldemir & SEZER, 2009). In the early childhood teaching internship, the experience of teaching interns varies from the learning from college instructors and the actual internship in a classroom (Calamlam, 2020). Examining standards critically as socially and culturally formed is a necessary part of learning to teach in the early childhood internship (Hans & Blank, 2017). Early childhood education teachers must have the necessary skills to assess and address all of the children's learning and developmental needs because there are more young children with whom parents and caregivers must work (Jale Aldemir & SEZER, 2009).

A cutting-edge approach to delivering expertly created, learner-centered, and interactive environments, anywhere, and at any time is flexible learning. It combined instructional design concepts with the resources and capabilities of the Internet, new technologies, and other learning modalities (Khan, 2007). Learning may now take place in workplaces, homes, and schools (Relan & Gillani, 1997). It allows students alternatives as to when and where to can study (Krauth, 1998). Flexible learning employs a number of delivery techniques that are created to complement one another and promote adaptability in learning. It blends self-paced learning, real-time online instruction, face-to-face instruction, and activity-based

learning. As a result, a well-designed flexible learning environment encourages students to be active participants in their studies (Khan, 2007).

3. Research Methodology

A. Research Design

This study made use of the descriptive qualitative phenomenological design inspired by Husserlian phenomenology. In order to get the most intuitive presentation possible, direct exploration, analysis, and description of the specific phenomena that is used in descriptive phenomenology on the lived experience of early childhood teaching interns in a flexible learning environment (Spiegelberg, 1975). On the three key components of essence, intuiting, and phenomenological reduction, the study will apply Husserl's descriptive phenomenological approach (Streubert & Carpenter, 2007).

B. Research Environment

This study is conducted in one of the State University in Cebu City, Philippines, 6000 Cebu. It was founded in 1902 and is a research state university in Cebu City, Philippines. The researchers selected this area for the study because it is the most accessible for this study.

C. Key Informants

A purposive sample strategy is used to determine the key informants of the study. All informants shall meet the following criteria: (1) Early Childhood teaching intern; (2) experience teaching in a flexible learning environment; (3) enrolled in the University. The point of data saturation is employed to determine the number of key informants which is achieved at 15 informants from the expected total number of 15 informants. Data saturation is defined by Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi (2017) as the moment at which participant responses are already being repeated.

D. Research Instruments

The primary tool for the study's data collection is its researchers. In-depth, unstructured face-to-face interviews is used as the secondary instrument. The main question will be, "Can you please share with me your experiences as a student teacher in a flexible learning environment?". This will be the main interview question. When necessary, more prompts and probes is used to elicit more specific explanations of their experiences, for instance, "Can you please explain to me what you mean by that" or "Tell me more about that."

E. Data Gathering Procedures

The following parameters served as the researchers' guidance in conducting the study: The informants' willingness in the study is requested before the interview in which they are given the consent form. The informants are given the needed clarification written in the consent form and an overview of the interview procedure. The qualified informant's information will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. To gather information, the researchers had taken down notes and also

audio recordings during the whole duration of the interview, with the informants' approval.

In the interview process, the informants are individually engaged in an in-depth unstructured face-to-face interview for at least 40 minutes to an hour to discuss their lived experiences as an Early Childhood teaching interns in a flexible learning environment.

After the interview, the recording is stop immediately and showed gratification by giving them an honorarium in a form of token. Records like as notes, transcripts, and audio files shall be treated with confidentiality. Personal information will remain anonymous when pseudonyms are used to protect privacy and confidentiality.

F. Data Analysis (Treatment of Data)

Colaizzi's (1978) analytical approach, which is in line with Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, is used in this study. The following seven steps make up this method: (1) To get a sense of the subjects, read the descriptions (protocols) for each one; (2) Go back to each protocol and highlight important statements; (3) Formulate meanings. This is done by explicitly stating the significance of each important remark; (4) Create thematic clusters from concepts of meaning. Use the original protocols to revalidate these clusters. Noting discrepancies inside or between the various clusters will help you resist the urge to disregard data that don't fit. (5) Integrate your research's findings in a comprehensive summary of the topic you studied; (6) Make as clear a statement as you can identifying the essential structure of the phenomenon you are studying, and then formulate a comprehensive description of it; and (7) Validation of the results involves visiting each participant again to check the data with their personal experiences.

G. Validity and Reliability

By assessing the final results and the respondents' views of its correctness, member checking was carried out to validate the accuracy of the qualitative data (Cresswell and Cresswell, 2017). This is carried out through a follow-up interview with each respondent and providing them with a chance to reflect on the findings.

H. Ethical Considerations

In this study, the researchers place great importance on the ethical aspects to ensure that the informant's well-being is protected. The researcher shall also see to it that the participants shall receive a letter of consent that explains the elements of this study. The researchers will not invade the participant's privacy without permission, and all disclosed information and records of the participants are stored in a locked device that only the researcher can open. After the termination of the study, the researcher will delete the information and dispose of it. The researchers provide an honorarium to the participants as a token of appreciation in a form of thing. This is given after the face-to-face interview is conducted. In case of utilization and publication, the researcher will be acknowledged as a secondary author which the researcher and faculty adviser signed.

4. Results and Discussion

Internships were major, once-in-a-lifetime events in the eyes of student interns. Internship provides teaching interns various experiences which formulate themes with its corresponding sub-themes. Having an internship in a flexible learning environment means that student interns must overcome the challenges and obstacles brought about by changes in policies and teaching-learning modalities. Through persistent personal character and social assistance, the student interns navigated their way out of the various difficulties. And, in the end, they felt rewarded and valuable despite the grueling and arduous times.



Fig. 1. Stages of lived experiences of early childhood teaching interns

A. Stage 1: Confronting Challenges

The immersion of teaching interns in an actual field known as a teaching internship brought some challenges. Due to the emergence of a new modality in the teaching-learning process which is the flexible learning environment, teaching interns experienced difficulties as well as advancements in their field. These challenges and advancements are driven by the procedures required in flexible learning instruction and the delivery of the lesson in this newly imposed teaching and learning environment.

1) Sub-Theme 1: Delivery of the Teaching-Learning Process

With the recent phase in education which is the flexible learning environment, the teaching interns experienced different challenges and changes in modes of instruction. Participants pointed out different challenges in terms of the delivery of the learning instruction process.

- Participant 1: It is difficult for me to gain updates from the students.
- Participant 2: It is hard to unable the use of tools for the class that all the students can perform.
- Participant 3: Adjusting the instructional materials, from using technology-based materials to making visual aids with raw materials was part of the challenge I encountered.
- Participants 5: Making the lessons interesting and interactive to get students' attention is not easy.
- Participant 6: Delayed of communication between teacher and the students is a challenge.
- Participant 9: It needs a big time in terms of activities and instructional materials.
- Participant 15: Lack of physical connection with the learners is a key different in this kind of set up.

The delivery of the teaching and learning process has

changed significantly and had a major effect on education, including challenges for teachers. For context, using technology-based materials in teaching involves learning technical skills such as using PowerPoint and online presentations while making visual aids entails using raw materials that include creativity skills that are far different from how technology-based materials work. With this, delivering lessons in an interactive and interesting way is challenging and therefore a struggle in terms of transitioning from one to another medium of instruction.

Decisions about the medium of instruction play an important influence in determining the learning processes that occur in all classrooms (Tollefson & Tsui, 2003). Thus, flexible learning employs several delivery techniques that are created to complement one another and promote adaptability in learning (Khan, 2007). In this sense, participants affirm that there are a lot of things to consider knowing that there are new things that are needed to be learned especially in a virtual classroom and shifting to a physical one. In addition, knowing how to handle both ways of conducting a lesson in online and face-to-face teaching helps one become more equipped for whatever learning modality to use.

2) Sub-Theme 2: Inadequate Internet Connectivity

The change of environment schools was introduced into a new learning modality that greatly put them into changes and challenges. The respondents revealed that they lacked the basic necessity required in conducting an online class which is internet connectivity. Participants manifested this challenge as to what they had experienced during their classes:

- *Participant 2: As much as I want the class to be smoothly done, there are things that I don't have control specifically in the online modality like my internet connection as I mentioned earlier or my students' internet connection was poor.*
- *Participant 4: There are times they can't answer me back when they were called to participate, you really have to have a stable connection in order to have a smooth discussion without any interruptions.*
- *Participant 7: In my first online demonstration/class experience, I admit that it was a failure because my internet connection was not good and my laptop eventually shut down.*

The sudden change in styles, in the execution of teaching and in the basic necessity of teaching interns had significantly brought effects on education that led them to have in-depth struggles and hardships to conduct flexible learning modalities. It reflects how internet connectivity greatly affects the virtual class as this affects the flow and progress of the lesson, the teaching performance and the delivery of lessons and activities. In addition, the locale of the teachers during the class and inflexibility of this modality has also been reported to be affecting teaching interns performance due to inadequate internet connectivity to support them during classes.

In the middle of the sudden shift of learning, the challenge of having slow internet connectivity in the Philippines continues to loom over (Azcarraga & Peña, 2019). With the result being shared, it was greatly proved that teaching interns are struggling

in conducting their classes due to internet connection. Thus, to construct effective and appropriate approaches toward online learning, pondering and reflecting on one's student's journey and looking at things from their perspective in the new normal of education is believed to be one effective step to take as claimed by Aguilar & Torres (2021).

3) Sub-Theme 3: Stress Management

Given the struggles and challenges faced by the new phenomenon and face of education, teaching interns have noted that they experience stress through not knowing, understanding and expecting it. The respondents have expressed their realization and experiences of how their flexible teaching internship has caused them stress. With this at hand, personal management such as coping with stress and time management is then highly regarded to be some of the topics mentioned in examining the lived experiences of early childhood teaching interns during flexible learning environments.

- *Participant 3: Online may drain us but face-to-face drains us way too much. Sometimes, I breakdown not because I am complaining with the tasks given to me as a student teacher but sometimes, I just can't function and tempt to procrastinate.*
- *Participant 10: It's exhausting of course given the load of work that I need to accomplish in a scheduled time. I break down not because I am complaining about the tasks given to me as a student teacher but because sometimes, I just can't function and am tempted to procrastinate.*
- *Participant 13: It's physically tiring in my part as I have to juggle with the changes from online to face-to-face.*
- *Participant 14: I struggled mostly in classroom management, and also my patience was tested. I found it difficult to handle young learners with behavioral issues.*

Moreover, respondents stated that the teaching internship generates stress due to certain factors they experience at hand such as the difficulty to handle young learners with behavioral issues, lots of distractions, lack of resources like gadgets, and self-perception or assessment. Additionally, the teaching interns had shown optimism and believed that the situation allowed them to learn new things and gain more confidence. They viewed their experience as challenging and made ways of these challenges as opportunities to be able to learn and better their efforts in the future. Among these, the teaching interns also shared their awareness that in flexible teaching internships, time management is essential. They have specified that to manage their time, they make an effort and strategy to make work ahead of time.

The passion and devotion of teachers, as stated by Serin (2017), drives them to stay in their career regardless of the problems they encounter. Despite the hardships they have faced in managing their time, the teaching interns make a way to survive and become part of the solutions to their struggle. They have engaged and utilized different strategies to manage and accomplish their internship. According to the study of (MacIntyre et al., 2020), they have revealed that the most

common coping strategies utilized by teachers are approach coping strategies. This begins with accepting the difficulties followed by planning and actively doing something about the situation. However, despite the challenges met, teaching interns stayed positive and motivated to continue with the journey because of their passion and commitment to teaching.

B. Stage 2: Overcoming Adversity

Despite difficulties, the teaching interns have managed to live and contribute to the solutions to the problems they face. As teaching interns face different challenges, they strive to overcome such challenges through different approaches.

1) Sub-Theme 1: Application of Learned Theories and Pedagogies

Respondents showed positive responses in applying learned theories and pedagogies in their teaching internship such as to minimize or prevent disruptive behavior inside the classroom and develop skills in teaching that soon can be used in managing their class in the future. All of these are supported by the respondents.

- *Participant 8: We utilize modern learning methods such as using online tools and engaging activities that best suited their needs. I can integrate discipline and classroom management. I also possess the necessary skills needed in teaching face-to-face.*
- *Participant 11: So, in a flexible learning environment, we also integrate cross-curricular teaching, which means that we can incorporate and integrate multiple academic disciplines in one lesson.*
- *Participant 12: On the hand face-to-face setting was a different challenge because you have to apply the theories you learned for many years in real life*
- *Participant 15: My experiences as a student teacher in a flexible learning environment are I got to know my strengths and weaknesses in teaching to this type of learning modality and with this, it helps me mold my dream to become a teacher soon as I apply it on the process.*

The majority of respondents stated that they enjoyed teaching because they were familiar with the subject matter and considered the practice of teaching to be very engaging because they could put what they had learned into practice. They recognized the value of establishing an environment that is conducive to learning and using positive reinforcement. Teaching interns are frequently advised to put theory into practice by choosing and implementing instructional techniques and assessment strategies, as well as by making choices that have an impact on our classroom climate and interactions with students.

Khalil and Elkhider (2016) explained the importance of linking instructional strategies or techniques to the theories of human learning. They stated that learning theories are used as a basis for the choice of particular instructional strategies. The learned theories and pedagogies allow the student interns to predict the effectiveness of instructional materials and teaching pedagogies. The process of teaching interns path to professionalism requires active construction and reconstruction

of knowledge from diverse sources (Yin, J. 2019). Clapton and Cree (2004) conclude that there is a need for learning models that integrate theory and practice in ways that bring the field into the classroom as well as take the classroom into the field.

C. Stage 3: Acquiring Success

With all the challenges and lived experiences of the Early Childhood teaching interns in a flexible learning environment, they can say that their internship experience is a great accomplishment. They described how the challenges they encountered helped them to develop skills and learned a lot of new things. Even though they were able to meet a lot of struggles along the way, they are still able to cope with it. Thus, the challenging experiences they have experienced resulted in success.

1) Sub-Theme 1: Meaningful Experience

Teaching interns reported that they found that their struggle and challenges in a flexible learning environment during the internship process give opportunity for them to have a meaningful experience. The challenges encountered during the internship gave the participants a meaningful learning experience that fostered teachers' professional development. Moreover, participants affirm that these meaningful experiences help them become more prepared for their future careers. Thus, these experiences make the foundation of learning during the time they are in the field.

- *Participant 3: It was such a fulfilling experience because learning complex technicalities of presentations is not simple, and I am happy that I learned how to do them. I had to become a jack of all trades.*
- *Participant 5: Teaching in a flexible learning environment affects my lived experiences during internship period in a way of allowing me to manage my momentum of the learning process.*
- *Participant 6: I was able to experience a lot of things that can help me in the future which makes learning fun, understandable and interesting throughout the process.*
- *Participant 11: I am actually glad that I had the opportunity to experience a flexible learning environment, so I would say it was good. Also, it enables me to have a meaningful experience.*
- *Participant 12: I can say that it made my lived experiences during internship period a rewarding experience as I am learning new skills along the way.*
- *Participant 13: They put me in either way I would not be adjusting to much and this also help me become more equipped to whatever learning modality we would use. Such as technological and digital skills.*

This highlights how the challenges and struggles of the teaching interns in a flexible learning environment gave them a meaningful experience. It can be analyzed, how those experiences of the teaching interns helped them being able to gain new skills as what participant 9 mentioned in becoming a "jack of all trades". The experiences they've had doesn't only bring struggle to them but also a fun learning experience.

The experiences of teaching interns in a flexible learning environment made them achieve long-term learning by developing their self-regulated and self-directed learning skills and by repeating and integrating the things they learned in face-to-face education via virtual classroom activities outside the school (Şentürk, 2021). Flexible learning environment will allow them to enhance and develop their teaching skills and will result to acquiring success while developing a positive attitude (Yılmaz & Malone 2020). Thus, the challenges experienced by the teaching interns in a flexible learning environment allows them to become more eager to deliver meaningful learning experience to the learners.

2) Sub-Theme 2: Convenience

Aside from teaching interns meaningful experiences, respondents viewed flexible learning as convenient. Respondents of the study stated that flexible learning is flexible and easier for both students and teachers.

- *Participant 1: It allows to manage the class in real-time and give activities and assignments to the students.*
- *Participant 4: It made me adapt more quickly with changes. It teaches me how to be flexible also as a teacher when circumstances come on the way when we are teaching.*
- *Participant 5: This environment is accessible such in learning instruments such as videos and pictures for we can just share our screen right away.*
- *Participant 6: Personally, aside from loving to learn other types of learning environment, I was just enjoying my pace in teaching to my students that allows to set personal momentum or phase in both learning and teaching process.*
- *Participant 8: For me, flexible learning is a good experience, from the word itself it is flexible not just only to the students but also to the teaching interns. It somehow saves money and further expenses*
- *Participant 12: Also, it is convenient for the teachers which is a good thing because it causes little to no stress which enables the teachers to be creative and provide much more meaningful experiences for the learners.*

The flexible learning is convenient as respondents reported various forms of convenience, they experienced during the flexible learning environment; these are the easy access of giving activities and assignments to students which is easier for both students and teachers. In other words, flexible learning offers the advantages of face-to-face support and instruction while allowing the student and teachers to access the resources at anytime and anywhere as long as the internet connection permits. This gives student and teacher time to work at their own pace while minding the deadlines set, which gives them a little time to breathe and saves a little for their further expenses that were supposed to be allocated for travel expenses.

Flexible learning can help pre-service teachers in providing several formats of learning materials and save expenses by utilizing digital and technological learning materials. Flexible

delivery offers a suitable range of how and where students can access learning materials (Kokoç, 2019). In summary, the concept of flexible learning was expanded beyond the delivery dimension to include flexible pedagogy. This is not only a characteristic of students, but also of instructional practices at the institutional level (Huang et al., 2020).

5. Conclusion

The implementation of flexible learning in education leads to a diverse lived experience of teaching interns during their teaching internship. Several themes were coming up from their point of view which are confronting challenges, overcoming adversity and lastly acquiring success. It emphasizes the challenges and advantages that flexible learning modality offers. It helps teaching interns acquire unexpected information, abilities, and values spontaneously. Due to the changeable nature of the learning environment, teaching interns had to overcome the challenges and obstacles posed by shifting regulations and modes of instruction. Through perseverance, the teaching interns were able to overcome many challenges and eventually felt their rewarding and significant success after the difficult and trying moments. Furthermore, results showed that given the challenges from the teaching and learning environment as well as personal aspects and stress management, teaching interns remained resilient and coped with these struggles throughout their experiences. Nonetheless, the teaching interns are effectively leading their teaching internship path through their flexibility, adaptability, goal-driven personality, and solid support system. It is therefore perceived that teaching interns are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of flexible learning modality and how it shapes them throughout their internship.

A. Recommendations

1) Theme 1: Confronting Challenges

1. Attend seminar-workshop with regards to bridging the gap between online teaching to offline or face-to-face teaching.
2. Join seminar-workshops that talk and encourage personal growth and development.
3. Teacher education institutions should swiftly redirect their training program to implement and encourage pre-service teachers and students to practice time management and avoid to procrastinate.
4. Upgrading of the internet connectivity should be the top priorities of the government to sustain, ensure and provide continuity and improvement of the teaching and learning process.
5. Encourage school buddy to create and propose ways and solutions to aid and improve connectivity of students and teachers across the campus.

2) Theme 2: Overcoming Adversity

1. This will provide strategies to apply for teaching interns at present and future times.
2. Serves as a blueprint for them to decide on which tool to use and how to integrate it into the classroom given the resources currently available for use in classrooms

and on online platforms.

3) Theme 3: Acquiring Success

1. Serves as an avenue to develop relevant skills in teaching-learning process.
2. This will serve as reference to other educators, researchers and practitioners implementing similar case studies in their context.

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