

Experiences and Challenges encountered by the Pre-service teachers in a Community Immersion Program

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the experiences and challenges of pre-service teachers in a community immersion program from a local higher education institution in Olongapo City, Philippines. Phenomenological method of research is used in this study which was participated by a total of 32 pre-service teacher. According to the participants, this provides them with experiences that gives them motivation and inspiration to pursue teaching. This also gave the pre-service teacher a hint of what may be experienced in the actual teaching field such as managing the class, and diversity of the learners. On the other hand, the challenges they encountered was related to the class environment. It is recommended to provide more time allocation for the implementation of community immersion.

INTRODUCTION

Preservice teachers' preparation is crucial to the real world of teaching. To prepare teacher education students, field study courses are embedded in the curriculum before the teaching internship. Other preparations such as attendance to seminar/workshop with special topics relevant to the teaching-learning process as well as community immersions are included in the long list of preparations. As stated by Murrel, et.al (2015), understanding social, cultural, and experiential factor outside of the school support or hinder individuals in school is integral part of preparation. It is important for pre-service teachers to learn these factors which will enable pre-service teachers to have a knowledge on how to handle students, and an understanding of how, when, and where teaching and learning can occur (Hamilton & Margot, 2019). In the same study of Hamilton & Margot (2019), community based experience is found to be important clinical component for the learning of pre-service teachers. It is also revealed that community-based experiences allow pre-service teacher to learn how to facilitate and assess the learning of the students.

In other countries, immersing pre-service teachers in the community is done through service learning projects/programs. According to the study of Czop Assaf, et.al (2019), pre-service teachers shaped by service learning project built a caring relationship and fostered trusting ties with local students and formed supplementary viewpoints that emphasized the cultural capital of the students' locality. The preservice teachers reported a strong desire to support a more completely human educational environment where students have the chance to express their agency, their creativity, their language, and their culture. They also expressed deep critical thought in terms of teaching and learning process. In the study of Smolcic (2011), it was found that immersion experiences enable teachers to be culturally responsive to the diversity of the learners. As pre-service teacher, it will be integral on their training and preparation to be part of an immersion experience in a selected community. Thus, experiences is tantamount to the success of the pre-service teacher when deployed in their respective fields of specialization.

Community Immersion program is one of the courses offered in a local higher education institution in the Olongapo City, Philippines. The aim of this course is to provide relevant experience to all pre-service teachers enrolled in the course/subject. This focuses on the application of concepts such as classroom management, teaching-learning process, and showcasing pedagogical knowledge and skills. This study explores the experiences and challenges encountered by the pre-service teachers during their community immersion on their chosen locality.

IMPLEMENTATION AND METHODS

This study examines the experiences and challenges encountered by Preservice teacher during the community immersion program. The study used qualitative method, specifically phenomenological research, which is concerned with the study of experience from individual's perspective (Lester, 1999). In the same manner, Creswell (2013) describe phenomenology as an approach that focuses on the common meanings of the lived experience of a particular group.

It also allows the researcher to arrive at a description of the nature of certain phenomenon. This approach is used in the study as the main concern of the study is to determine the experiences of the pre-service teachers in a community immersion program. The study used thematic analysis in the pre-service teachers' responses to identify patterns in data such as commonalities or contrast (Smith & Firth, 2011). Documentary analysis is also used to examine pre-service teachers' reflections. It is used as a form of qualitative research approach in which documents are interpreted by the researcher (Bowen, 2009).

The participants were selected through criterion sampling. According to Cohen & Crabtree (2006), Criterion sampling involves the selection of sample based on some pre-established criteria. These criteria are of importance to the research in most significant way. The most prominent criterion is the experience of the participants with the phenomenon under study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). This kind of sampling will be helpful in studying a very specific or narrow criteria and understand its implications. This allows the researcher to study the criteria in depth and with emphasis. The selected participants have met the following criteria that are essential for gathering data needed in order to gain in-depth understanding of the said topic of the study: (1) must be BSED-Science or BSED-Mathematics enrolled at Gordon College for A.Y. 2021-2022, (2) must be participant of the community immersion program. The questionnaire as the instrument used in this study is content validated by experts and undergone pilot testing for further clarification, verification and interpretation. A total of 32 participants have participated in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section deals with the findings of the pre-service teachers' responses based on the documentary analysis and thematic analysis. This study mainly focused on examining the experiences and challenges of pre-service teachers encountered during a community immersion program.

Figure 1 below illustrates the experience of the pre-service teachers during the first day of teaching immersion. The rating scale is from 1 which means worst to 7 which means best. As shown in the figure, there are 6 or 18.8% of the 32 respondents rated the first day experience of community immersion as 4 while there are 4 or 12.5% of the 32 respondents who rated the first day experience of the as 7 which is the highest rating equivalent to best experience.

How would you rate your experience on the first day of teaching in a community immersion activity/program?

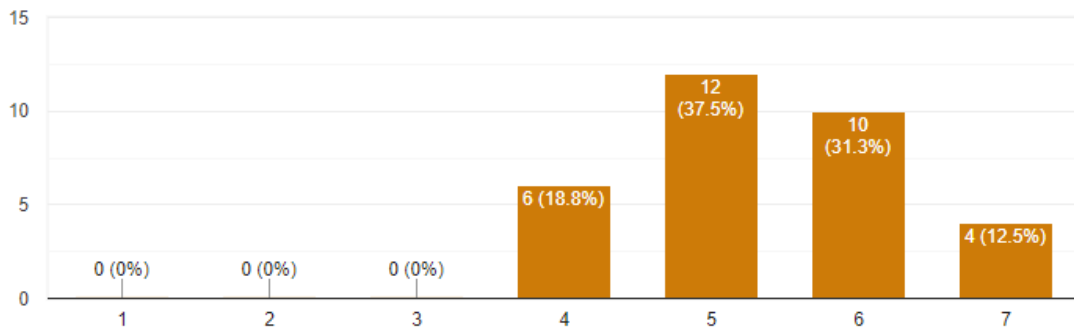


Figure 1. Rate of experience on the 1st day of teaching immersion

To support the data from Figure 1, the participants were asked for the reason of such rating. Most of the pre-service teachers stated that the experience was fun and exciting but tiring. It is tiring due to the fact that the students were grade-schoolers and easily get distracted and so playful with others.

"I rate it that way because it brings to me a lot of fun teaching students. Seeing them enjoy what they learn and have fun"- Pre-service teacher #13

On the other hand, some pre-service teachers stated that student get distracted easily and have uncontrollable behavior is due to the reason that most of the students enjoyed the experience.

"The children are too happy, resulting to their uncontrollable behavior. However, the student teachers are able to manage them so I guess it is fine." - Pre-service teacher #16

Some pre-service teachers also indicated that there should be more time to be allotted because Pre-service teacher #23 stated that "the activity with the kids was enjoyable for me, but it was short."

Overall, most of the pre-service teachers rated it as 5 because the experience was good, fun, exciting, and challenging at the same time.

Figure 2 below illustrates the response of the participants with regards to the over-all experience for the two-week teaching immersion. It can be gleaned from the figure that there are 7 participants or 21.9% of the 32 participants, while majority of the participants rated their experience as 6 and 8 participants or 25% of the 32 responses rated the over-all experience of two-week teaching immersion as 7 which is the highest rating equivalent to best experience. Comparing this result to the first day of pre-service teachers' experience, there is an increase to rating of 6 and 7. This implies that the pre-service teachers' experience improved.

After the two-week teaching immersion, how would you rate your experience?

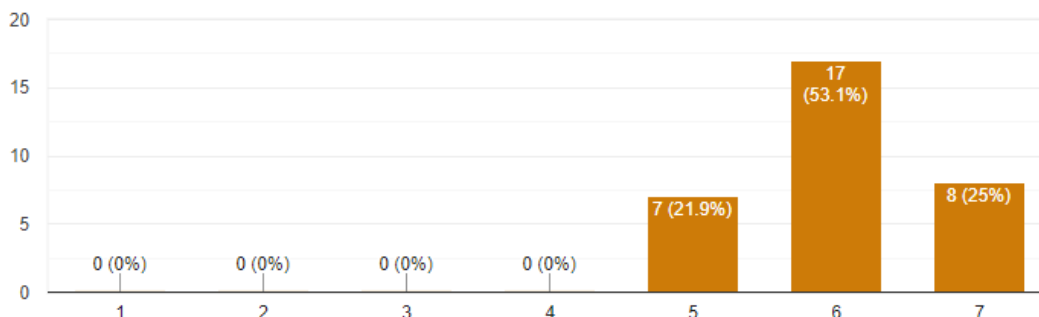


Figure 2. Rate of experience after the 2-week immersion.

To support the data from Figure 2, the participants were asked for the reason of such rating and to determine the reason for the improvement of the pre-service teachers' experience of the community immersion. Most of the participants stated that experiences and knowledge on how to handle students were gained during the immersion program.

As indicated by Pre-service teacher #16: "As a future educator, I get to learn my weaknesses and gain experience. Through this immersion, I am able to determine what aspect I need to develop for me to be able to become an effective educator."

The same is stated by Pre-service teacher #17 and #21 as follows:

"It was the best two weeks so far, being able to experience teaching and giving knowledge to students makes me proud. From adjusting to becoming comfortable, it was tiring but I gained a lot of experience as well as skills from that immersion and that's the reason why I rate it the best."

"Because it is challenging yet fun. Due to the challenges, we gained experience and knowledge on how to handle children."

With this kind of experience and realization coming from teacher education candidates, it clearly shows that community immersion and community partnership practices may address shared goals, and prepare student-teachers in facing student diversity inside the classroom (Lees & Kennedy, 2017; Mustian, et.al, 2017).

In the analysis of participant's responses to the overall experience of the community immersion through teaching, there are four themes that were formed: (1) Applying Teaching techniques and strategy, (2) observing different types of learners, (3) being able to monitor student progress, and (4) being recognized as a teacher.

Applying teaching techniques and strategies

The pre-service teachers claimed and stated that the teaching immersion allowed them to apply some teaching techniques and strategies especially on how to handle students, manage their learnings, and determine the appropriate way to deal with the misconceptions about the lesson

As stated by Pre-service teacher #21: "The best experience for me is teaching the children some techniques in doing mathematics that they will surely use in the future and the majority of children really listen on what I am saying."

Pre-service teacher #2 stated: "I was able to apply some strategies and motivation activities that works for the student. It is very fulfilling when the students participate in the discussion. Some have a very wide and creative imagination in which a good aspect in studying science."

Observing different types of learners

While in the teaching immersion, the pre-service teachers were able to observe the diversity of the learners. Some learners have very short attention span while others get distracted easily by other learners. Here are some of the experiences of the pre-service teachers:

"The best experiences I had is that I was able to have a better understanding that every student is really different from everyone." -Pre-service teacher #8

"It was really nice being with different types of students." -Pre-service teacher #14

"Playing while learning because they are need a lot of attention and you need to catch their interest because they got bored when all you do is lecture." -Pre-service teacher #19

"Being with different type of learners will give you the advantage because you will know the capability of students, the environment where they grow and you will have insight on how to teach them." -Pre-service teacher #21

This kind of experience with the community is very essential for the pre-service teachers. This will help the preservice teachers realize self-efficacy (Bernadowski, et.al 2013). With such realization, this could also help them have the belief that they will be effective teachers of diverse students (Cone, 2012). In the study of Mergler, et.al (2017), giving pre-service teachers experience in the community will enable pre-service teacher to support diversity and have the preparedness to teach diverse students.

Being able to monitor student progress

The teaching immersion enables the pre-service teachers not only to manage students learning but also monitor their progress during the entire teaching immersion program. In other countries, this kind of activity is classified as a service learning. According to a literature review and study of Salam, et.al (2019), the service learning is commonly employed in academic disciplines such as medical and nursing sciences, business and also teacher education. While Márquez-García, et. al (2020) stated that this allows the pre-service teachers to reconstruct their path of learning.

According to the pre-service teachers, it is very fulfilling on their part seeing the progress of the learners that they've been teaching in the teaching immersion program. Pre-service teacher #15 stated: *"It is very fulfilling and motivating as a teacher to witness the achievement and improvement of my students."*

"It is very heartwarming to motivate students to associate with other individuals and encourage them to do activities and see their progress in terms of activities" -Pre-service teacher #28.

Being recognized as a teacher

The pre-service teachers evidently enjoyed the experience in the teaching immersion program. One of the most notable theme for their overall experience in this program is the fulfillment on their part of being recognized as a teacher. Here are some of the statements of the pre-service teachers:

"I love it when the students calls me "Ma'am or Teacher". I also love it when they were paying attention and participating with my discussion." - Pre-service teacher #6

"I like it when learners were so appreciative of us, being their teachers." - Pre-service teacher #9

"I'm pleased whenever students refer to me as their teacher."-Pre-service teacher #26

It is inevitable not to face any challenges regardless of how prepared is the program especially this teaching immersion program or activity of pre-service teacher. As part of this study, the pre-service teachers were asked to identify the most encountered challenges during the entire activity. Here are the most encountered problems/challenges during the program:

1. Small venue or room for the program and activities;
2. Disorderly learner; and
3. Learners get distracted easily.

Though faced with these challenges, the pre-service teachers were able to manage these and conducted the program smoothly. Such immersion program is indeed a good experience for the pre-service teachers as a first-hand experience to the real field of teaching.

As part of this study, the pre-service teachers were also asked about a short reflection whether the community/teaching immersion enabled them to realize and see their own self as a teacher in the real field. The table below shows the response of the pre-service teachers.

Tabel.1 Table of prospective teacher responses

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	24	75
Maybe	6	18.75
No	2	6.25
Total	32	100

Among 32 pre-service teachers, 24 participants responded "Yes", 6 participants responded "May be" and 2 participants responded "No". Majority of the

students stated that the immersion program made them realized that they can commit and be a better teacher in the field. Here are some of the realizations of the pre-service teachers:

“Yes, during the immersion, I got an idea of what a teacher really is, what exactly the role of a teacher is.” -Pre-service teacher #14

“I always have second thoughts if I will continue this path as a teacher. But this experience makes me see a different kind of perspective, where I am a person that could provide hope for this learners.” -Pre-service teacher #26

“Yes, because of what I experience in the community immersion program I set this as one step closer to my dream to be a future educator. Knowing my strength and limitation in this community immersion program is one of my best experience.” -Pre-service teacher #20

“Yes. Even before the community immersion program, I can't see myself in other profession or field other than teaching. And just like what I mentioned, this activity made me realize that I made the right decision in choosing Education as my course.” -Pre-service teacher #19

The quoted verbatim above are some of the realizations of pre-service teachers who were not sure or even confused whether they will be a good teacher or they will love the teaching profession. In the study of Wilcoxon, et.al (2021), pre-service teachers need to recognize and consider the personal lenses they bring to their classrooms. Community immersion provides authentic field experiences to the pre-service teachers. With such experience, pre-service teachers may develop skills in managing diversity of students and understand how teachers in the field enjoy and attain fulfillment in this profession.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the experiences and challenges of the pre-service teachers, the following is concluded:

1. The pre-service teachers have an improved view on the field of teaching after the immersion program. Some of them were not so sure at first if they will succeed in the field of education but after the teaching immersion, they gained more inspiration to pursue this field.
2. With this program, pre-service teachers were able to observe different types of learners and learning style. This is important experience as this will give them knowledge on how to handle diversity of learners in the real world of teaching.
3. This provide avenue for pre-service teachers in acquiring skills of classroom management and application of teaching strategies.
4. The challenges experienced by the pre-service teachers such as small room, disorderly learners and learners getting distracted easily are some of the actual challenges in the real world of teaching. Encountering and managing this challenges enabled pre-service teachers to prepare themselves to solve classroom challenges such as this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the recommendations of this study:

1. Provide more learning avenues for pre-service teachers to actually apply pedagogical knowledge and skills suited for their specialization.
2. Craft an actual program for the community immersion of the pre-service teachers appropriate to the subject specialization of the pre-service teachers.
3. Provide support and training for the pre-service teachers.
4. Allot more time for the community immersion of the pre-service teachers so that more learnings may transpire and better reflections of field immersion learning.

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