

Student Teaching Internship Amidst the Pandemic: The Lived Experiences of Early Childhood Education Student Interns

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article History</p> <p>Received: August 19, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: March 21, 2022</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords : Online Student Internship, Early Childhood Education, Online teaching-learning, Covid-19 Pandemic</p> <p>DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.6373538</p>	<p><i>Student Internship offers hands-on experiences that contribute to the total development of future teachers. This is the time that student interns' have the chance to apply the previously learned theories to actual practice. However, the sudden changes in the teaching-learning delivery, from face-to-face to online teaching brought a whole new set of experiences and learning. This study focused on the lived experiences of the early childhood student interns who took their internship amidst the pandemic. This is a phenomenological study that focused, explored, and explained the meaning of the experiences of student interns. The student interns revealed that they were Facing Challenges along the way however with the help of a positive mindset and having a strong support system, they were able to obtain success as shown in their feeling of fulfillment and satisfaction and their meaningful experiences earned. Indeed, the teaching internship experiences of student interns amid the pandemic are remarkably distinctive. The results of the study can be valuable sources of novel information. The teacher education institutions may refer to this valuable information to give the appropriate training and adjustments to their individual internship program..</i></p>

Introduction

The covid-19 pandemic greatly affects all aspects of human lives. Primarily a health crisis that cascades its effects to all people's activities, from livelihood, businesses, education, and among others. At the onset of the pandemic, almost all schools around the world shut their doors to face-to-face classes. In the case of the Philippines, it extends until the school year 2021. Schools abruptly change their teaching-learning delivery from actual in-person learning to online learning or any other distant learning modality (Dayagbil et al., 2021). Administrators, teachers, and students are scrambling to adopt to the new teaching-learning delivery system. The use of technology is not an option anymore but becomes the most sought-after commodity. Learning becomes so dependent on technology, different applications, and platforms that teachers are not competent with (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Student Internship is known to be significantly contribute to the preparation of competent teachers. This is the culminating phase of becoming a teacher (Anderson & Stillman 2013). This is the time when the student interns have the opportunity to apply the theories, they learn in their previous courses to actual classroom teaching or setting (Jinyoung, 2020). This is their bridge from theory to practice. The internship enables future early childhood educators to apply their knowledge about children's development, implement curriculum content, and enhance teaching skills to become effective early childhood teachers (Johnson et al. 2017; NAEYC 2009). Ideally, the student interns are given the chance to be in the real classroom during their practicum. However, the pandemic changes suddenly the course of the student intern's journey. These student interns are trained and set to teach the actual face-face classes but forced to have their internship in online teaching which they have not trained and prepared for in the previous semesters. Given the circumstances of the pandemic and teaching in early childhood education, the student teachers, their mentors, the young learners, and the parents traverse the uncertain road of online teaching and learning (Back et al., 2021). The experiences are new to all of them. Even the veteran teachers who serve as mentors of these student teachers become novices in adapting the new teaching-learning delivery (Marcum-Dietrich et al, 2020).

Most of the early childhood education adopted or believed in the play-based curriculum in which engaging the students to learn in face-to-face setting is through hands-on activities and play. Early childhood educators believed that to enhance children's development, they need to experience real-life and hands-on learning. (Rushton, 2011). However, the implementation of this play-based approach during a pandemic brought several challenges to teachers and parents alike (Yıldırım, 2021). Teachers reported challenges in sustaining children's interest during synchronous classes (Bassoket et al., 2020), the decline in students' motivation during online

classes (Lorenza & Carter, 2021), the lack of personal connection with the learners, high level of stress, social isolation, and anxiety (Barnett et al., 2021) The socio-emotional support and human warmth and care which are very essential in the preschoolers' development are compromised at this time of remote learning. These bring the additional challenges to teachers in an online setting. However, to foster engagement in an online setting, teachers' role in guided interactions with the use of technologies is fundamental (Plowman & McPake 2013; Stephen & Plowman, 2008). The challenge of young learners learning now lies in the teachers' competence to use the technology and parents' support (Jinyoung,2020). Furthermore, parents expressed that assisting and implementing online learning in addition to their daily family routines is overwhelming for them (Dong et al., 2020). The learning activities in the classroom cannot be filled by parents at home thus resulting to decline learning opportunities (Barnett et al., 2021)

Another factor that continuously affects early childhood education is the issue of digital learning and the exposure of children to different gadgets. American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children be exposed to gadgets of no more than 60 minutes per day. With the online teaching and learning this time, this is way more than what is ideal. Moreover, unlike older students, preschoolers still have little knowledge of computer and telecommunication techniques which could entail adult supervision in every synchronous class (Kruszewska et al., 2020). In addition, the issue of the impact of media on children's brains and literacy development is equally important to look into. Thus, in the implementation of online learning, early childhood educators must consider a developmentally appropriate curriculum that includes, online safety and health issues(Hu et al., 2020). Understanding and responding to these concerns entail ongoing professional learning for educators and future educators. (Barnett, 2021)

Given the present scenario, the sudden swift of internship program implementation, unprepared student interns, and the challenges and issues in online teaching among early childhood learners, this study explored the experiences of the early childhood education student interns having their internship in the middle of the pandemic. The findings would provide the first-hand experience and knowledge that can be the basis for the improvement and adjustment of the current online internship program in early childhood education.

Method

This is a qualitative study specifically utilizing the descriptive phenomenology method. This phenomenological research design attempts to understand the peoples' perspectives of a certain phenomenon (Pathak,2017). It elucidates the meaning of the lived experiences of a person or group of people around a known phenomenon (Christensen et al., 2010). In this present study, the lived experiences of the Early Childhood Education student teachers having their internship in the midst of the pandemic along with its abrupt changes in the teaching-learning delivery is the focus.

Purposive sampling was used to identify the participants of the study. Twelve (12) student interns who are having their practicum in the early childhood years. Early childhood years here are classes with learners aged 3.5-5.5 years old. Interviews of those who agreed to be the participants of the study are done through an online platform. The researcher has listed guide interview questions to help the participants narrate their experiences. After each participant interview, the researcher transcribed the proceedings immediately.

In the data analysis, the researcher followed Creswells' (2013) steps in the phenomenological analysis. The first is to put aside the researcher's personal judgments and prejudices, so as not to affect the process of analysis. Second, is the beginning of textual descriptions and identifying the relevant quotes from the participants. Third, these relevant topics are grouped and eventually given a meaning. Fourth, the researcher writes textual descriptions and adds verbatim quotations to discuss the meaning of the experiences. Fifth, the structural descriptions are written, and lastly, the researcher identifies the true essence of the phenomenon.

Ethical Consideration

The researcher personally contacted the selected participants of the study. They were briefed about the current study. Those who agreed to be part of the informants are made to sign the consent form. Then, the agreed date and time of the interview were set. The informants were made to choose their preferred online platform for the interview. Also, they were advised that they can withdraw as informants anytime if they want to. Data are treated with the utmost confidentiality. No names of informants were mentioned in any part of the paper.

Results and Discussion

Student interns viewed internship amid the pandemic as significant once-in-a lifetime experiences. From their viewpoint, several themes and subthemes were derived. The first theme is Facing Challenges with sub-themes Inadequacy of Internet Connectivity and Delivery of Teaching-Learning Process. The second theme is Overcoming Hardships with sub-themes Keeping a Positive Mindset and Support System. The last and third theme is Attaining Success with the following sub-themes: Feeling of Satisfaction and Fulfillment and

Meaningful Learning Experiences. Having the internship amidst the pandemic means Student interns needed to hurdle the struggles and hindrances brought by the changes of policies and teaching-learning modalities. The student interns navigated their way out of the different difficulties through persistent personal character and social assistance. And in the end, after the grueling and arduous times, they felt their rewarding and valuable success.

Facing the Challenges

Several challenges were identified by the student interns as they immersed themselves in student internship during a pandemic. These are brought by the logistics needed in online teaching and the delivery of the instruction in an online platform.

Inadequacy of Internet Connectivity

Student interns lacked the needed basic necessity in conducting an online class which is internet connectivity.

“Participant 6 There’s a lot of adjustments during my internship. Problem with an internet connection, I applied for a wired internet connection, another problem with my finances.

Participant 9 The major challenge that I encountered was the problem with my connectivity or my unstable internet connection. I vividly remember the pure horror and shock that I felt when I got disconnected from our online class while I was giving out instructions for the learners on how to do their activities.”

In developing countries like the Philippines, connectivity is still an issue. Teachers and students alike are experiencing unstable internet connectivity and the worst for many is the difficulty in accessing and availing this connectivity because of financial constraints. Similar findings with the study of Yilmaz et al.(2021), pre-school teacher candidates noted that the distance education system is insufficient in terms of infrastructure. And, internet connectivity is the number problem the teachers and learners encountered during the conduct of online teaching and learning (Kidd & Murray, 2020). In addition, socio-economic inequalities which cause the digital divide become more evident during this time of the pandemic. The digital divide puts some students at a disadvantage when the delivery of instruction relies on technology (Phillips, 2021). The student interns struggle with the new ways of doing things which nobody has well- prepared of and the socio-economic factor is making it worst. If the situation will not improve and the poor countries couldn’t provide for the basic essentials of conducting an online class, there would be more academic problems ahead of us.

Delivery of Teaching-learning Process

Aside from the lack of basic necessity of an online class, student interns narrated challenges in the conduct of the actual teaching and learning process. The interns struggle in their teaching preparations like, making the lesson plans, and on what strategies are appropriate to be used in an online class. *“Participant 6. the struggle in making pre-recorded videos since I am leaving in the city and the different noise where I live cannot be controlled. Make a lesson plan and think about what would be the best activity that would fit in an online class.”*

The student interns are not fully equipped with knowledge of online teaching due to limited to no experience and training at all in distant education. Similarly, in the study of Gonzalez-Calvo et al.() the student interns expressed a negative feeling of their lack of training to do online teaching.

Student interns also narrated that they have difficulty in establishing student engagement since they cannot observe the reactions of all students at a time. They also have limited experience in the managing behaviors of learners which would have been very exciting in a face-to-face setting. They also felt that human connection is very minimal or none at all. There is less interaction between young students and their teachers due to limited synchronous time.

Participant 2 Some limitations for online is that less student-teacher interaction, we can’t force the students to open cam”

The interaction between students with classmates is not so evident with young learners on an online platform. Young learners are hesitant to talk to their classmates in an online setting, the online class is purely academic in nature. Informal interactions between learners are not evident in an online platform. The same findings in the study of Kidd & Murray (2020); Yıldırım, (2021) emphasized problems on engagement and interaction among learners and teachers. And, this lack of contact and interaction contributed to reduced motivation and engagement levels among young learners (Lorenza & Carter, 2021). Reduced motivation and engagement in educational activities may impact the development and learning of children (Kruszewska et al., 2020).

Another aspect where student interns found to be challenging is the assessment part. Assessing young learners are mostly done through observations of the competencies they can do. This is difficult in an online setting.

“Participant 9 Online teaching wouldn’t allow us, interns, to fully observe the behaviors of the learners in the classroom so that we can properly assess them and evaluate them.

Participant 1 the parents are the coach their children, and because of that, we have difficulties on how to assess the child.

The student interns are concerned about the validity of their assessment when children are assessed with their parents beside them. Similarly, issues in the assessment of students' work at home are one of the areas that needed to be resolved (Velle et al. 2020). To support this finding, Duran (2021) concluded that evaluating the development of children during the pandemic could not be thoroughly done.

The student interns need to accommodate quickly in order to facilitate and be effective in the online class. Their 3-year preparations are more focused on face-to-face settings and here comes their internship where almost all are new. Their ability to adapt must be eminent in order to succeed in their internship journey. A professional development program that caters immediately to the needs of the teachers and interns is needed in order for the educational community to overcome the challenges brought by this pandemic (Crawford et al., 2021).

Overcoming Hardships

Despite the many struggles and challenges the student interns have encountered, they manage to survive and be part of the solutions to the problems they are facing. They have employed different strategies in order to manage and finish their internship. They start with accepting the fact and the situations they are in and so they need to act and do something for themselves. The help of the community also has a big impact on their survival. The same findings in the study of MacIntyre et al. (2020) revealed that the most common coping strategies utilized by teachers are approach coping strategies. This starts with acceptance of the difficulties followed by planning, and actively doing something of the situation. These approach coping strategies predict more favorable outcomes.

The interns narrated that they Keep Positive Mindset and have a strong Support system in order to overcome the difficulties they have during their internship.

Keeping a Positive Mindset

Keeping a Positive Mindset as narrated by the student interns is helping oneself, having a positive disposition despite the many struggles, reminding oneself that "I can make it", having self-motivation, and hoping that everything will be fine in time.

"Participant 3 Despite the negativity that surrounds me I always see the positive things that happened to me last semester

Participant 4 aside from praying, I motivated myself that I am almost close to my dream and I just need to keep going.

Participant 11 I told to myself that that was part of the process and not only me who adjusted but all of us Interns. I just always give my best in every demo."

The strong fighting spirit and resilience of the student interns help them to navigate their internship. This is a display of the strong personal quality of a teacher.

Support System

Student interns pointed out that a strong support system enables them to overcome their challenges during their internship. In their part, their immediate families are the source of inspiration and motivation to pursue their internship despite the challenges. The role of the school, the mentors, co-interns are among the most significant ones. The support given by these significant people in the lives of the students' interns contributed to their success in the entire internship program (Iradel et al., 2021). On part of the mentors, coaching in this time of pandemic gave them a unique opportunity to provide encouragement and support to their mentees (Crawford et al. 2021).

"Participant 1 I am still blessed together with my other co-interns because we have our mentor who is kind and keeps guiding our journey as an intern. After the class, she will let us realize our lapses, and then she will let us think about how to avoid the lapses on the next demonstration.

Participant 11 I am thankful for my mentor and co-mentee for all the support. Their assistance means a lot to me. From load, backing up when I got a lost connection. The encouragement of all the people who believed in me

Participant 5 And of course the learnings that I gained from the virtual teaching with the help and guidance of my mentor."

Mentoring is an integral part of internship however in this time of the pandemic, effective and humane mentoring would determine the success of the struggling student interns. It does not only provide pedagogical knowledge to student interns but most importantly socio-emotional support (Schwille 2008; Hawkey 2006). The support given to student teachers during their student teaching experiences is so crucial in their professional and personal growth (Varela & Desiderio, 2020). In addition, mentors' support also has an impact on fostering student interns' well-being (Sulis et al. 2021).

In any adversity that comes along the way, people always find it through with strong self-motivation and support systems.

Attaining Success

After the meaningful experiences of the student interns having their internship during a pandemic, they described their internship as a huge success. They call their practicum amidst the pandemic as “victory amid adversity”. The student interns faced lots of challenges in their online practicum. However, they traverse the difficult journey with strong personal and professional convictions fueled by the necessary support of significant others. Thus, the meaningful and bittersweet experiences, yield overwhelming success. For the student interns, success means having felt satisfaction and fulfillment in everything they do despite the many challenges. It also means having meaningful learning and takeaways given all the circumstances. Phillips (2021) reiterated that people learn in vulnerable times that provide opportunities to be strong.

Feeling of Satisfaction and Fulfilment

Student interns felt satisfied and fulfilled with their internship despite the challenges. They felt satisfied and fulfilled when they see that students have learned from their instruction. They view the pandemic as an opportunity to learn and that their learning is significant because of this extraordinary time. The pandemic somewhat offers opportunities to develop new online pedagogy (Velle et al. 2020).

Participant 1 I am satisfied in spite of the situation because I get to experience teaching in these trying times, where we need to adapt and adjust to the changes of our learning environment. Also, I get to enjoy what I am doing. Kids make me happy especially when you know they learn something from you at the same time I learn something from them.

Participant 7 At the beginning of my class I am met with joy and excitement as I see my students ready for my class and at the end of every class, there is this sense of fulfillment when I hear their words of thanks.

Participant 8 I'm satisfied because I've learned how to teach virtually, and it's also allowing me to hone my creativity

Participant 9 I am very satisfied with my practicum experiences because I truly gained a lot of essential new knowledge and information that I can surely apply in the future once I become an educator. The most valuable learning that I gained in my practice teaching aside from the new knowledge and guidance that I have received from my mentors, it would probably be knowing how rewarding and fulfilling it is to teach little children especially when their eyes light up when they are called to participate or answer a question in class because they are very eager to learn the lesson you have prepared and even as simple as acknowledging and greeting me as their teacher.

The sooner the student interns accepted the challenges and adapted to the new ways of doing things the better they view and value their experiences. The student teachers' feeling of success came from their growing confidence in managing their class properly (Jinyoung, 2020). Further the feeling of fulfillment among student interns is brought about by the adaptability and self-organization properties of well-being. As the teachers began to grasp their situations and are able to take actions to control and address adversities, their well-being will improve (Sulis et al. 2021)

Meaningful Learning and Takeaways

Student interns considered their student internship successful because of the many learning and take aways they gained from it. Some of the important skills they learn are personal values, pedagogical skills, and technological skills. Similar findings are reported with the study of Sepulveda- Escobar & Morrison (2020) which stated that student interns agreed that their experiences during this time of pandemic have strengthened their teacher preparation phase.

They developed more personal values like patience, respect, open-mindedness, love, time management, and reflective thinking. Student interns learn soft skills during this pandemic and the circumstances they are in this time (Back et al., 2021)

“Participant 6 One of the major lessons I learned during my practice teaching is being patient and loving my students. Participant 4 Always have patience and trust your students' capabilities because I believed that every child has their own uniqueness.

Participant 3 For me, respect is the most important value that I learned from my mentor and students. I am so happy that the learners and also the parents are respecting me

Participant 2 when I entered this journey and teach the students it enlightens my chaotic heart and mind. Now I realized that I really love and enjoy to teach

Participant 12 The most valuable learning you have gained in your practice teaching is a lot, first patience plays a big part, the longer the patience the happier you will be, second is always be open to learn and never translate correction into judgment that will make you feel bad, there will always be a big room for improvement”.

Also, they narrated pedagogical skills that they gained from online teaching. They believed that although their preparations and training were for the face-to-face platform, they were able to catch up and learn how to teach in the virtual classroom given the short time and opportunities they had.

“Participant 3 I am able to enhance my creative skill and I also enhance my skills in teaching. I can also use my experience in an online class when I am going to apply for online teaching soon.

Participant 7 The most valuable thing I’ve learned is a good classroom management and learning the different teaching styles that would cater to the needs of the students I am teaching.

Participant 10 Tried and implemented gamification and problem-based strategies in virtual classes, these are strategies to make the virtual classes interactive.”

The student interns are quickly adapting to the new learning environment. They were able to learn speedily, transform and apply their knowledge swiftly to effectively manage and teach online classes. Kidd & Murray (2020) describe this as pedagogic agility. This is when educators displayed flexibility in their practice and make decisions in quick but meaningful ways. The mandatory shift to online teaching provided new experiences to teachers and has an impact on their pedagogical attitudes. The more the teachers experienced online teaching, the more they are likely to develop a positive attitude towards it (Veraksa et al., 2021).

Lastly, student interns specified that having internship during this pandemic most of all enhances their technological skills because it is done online. Although at first, interns had hesitation of doing online internship because they are not trained for it. However, after the orientation and actual experiences, they are able to adapt and be used to it sooner than they expected.

“Participant 9 Aside from deciding on how to present our lesson, most of us had also no idea how to operate the online live classroom which is through the application called "zoom". Looking back, we even struggled to share our powerpoint presentation with the class. However, with the help and guidance of our mentor, as well as learning from my co-interns and through my personal experiences, I can say that I can see significant improvements in my teaching style.

Participant 10 I have enjoyed my internship. I have realized the importance of computer skills and in using different software. I rely much on PowerPoint and videos since it’s the best way to provide visual aids to learners. I try my best to make virtual classes as interactive and contextualized as possible

Participant 11 The valuable learning that I gained during my internships is my knowledge about technology. I discover a lot of things.

Participant 8 it’s also allowing me to hone my creativity in terms of PowerPoint presentations and video editing.”

Learning about technology is one of the highlights of learning among student interns in this time of pandemic in order to cope with the demands of their internship. Similarly, according to the study of Jones, (2020) teachers also pointed out that learning and using technology is one of the positive effects of online education. Further, teachers’ positive attitude towards using technology is the product of constant practice, studying, and experiencing or using such in their work. (Scherer et al, 2018)

These learning and takeaways of the student interns are made even more significant because of the time and circumstances they are in while acquiring all of these.

Conclusion

The teaching internship experiences of student interns amid the pandemic are remarkably distinctive. It develops the unanticipated knowledge, skills, and values of student interns. And at the same time, slams them with unprecedented difficulties that none of them is ever prepared for. However, with the inherent resilience, personal motivation, and strong support system, the student interns are successfully navigating their internship journey.

The student interns may have experienced the different and unexpected ways of teaching and learning process but these are equally important and relevant learning to cope with the fast- changing demands of education and society. While the world is yet to figure out the best and practical ways to address the different educational concerns, their experiences are valuable sources of novel information. The teacher education institutions may refer to this valuable information to give the appropriate training and adjustments to their individual internship program.

Recommendations

Based on the experiences of the student interns specifically the challenges they have hurdled, it is recommended that upgrading of the internet connectivity should be one of the priorities of the government to sustain and

ensure continuity of the teaching and learning process. Also, teacher education institutions should swiftly redirect their training program to capacitate teachers and students on the different online teaching and learning methods, strategies, and techniques.

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