

Navigating the Transition from Theory to Practice: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Lived Experiences, Professional Identity Formation, and Well-Being of Pre-Service Teachers during School Deployment in Philippine Basic Education Settings

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences, professional identity formation, and well-being of pre-service teachers during their deployment in selected DepEd elementary schools in Echague, Isabela, namely Echague East Central School, Echague West Central School, Echague South Central School, and Soyung Elementary School. Using in-depth interviews, reflective journals, and field notes, the study examined how pre-service teachers made meaning of their transition from university-based learning to actual classroom practice. Findings revealed five major themes: confronting classroom realities, translating theory into adaptive practice, constructing professional identity through mentorship, sustaining emotional well-being amid practicum demands, and developing commitment to the teaching profession. The study showed that deployment served not only as a requirement for professional training but also as a transformative experience that shaped confidence, resilience, reflective thinking, and teacher identity. Results affirm that practicum experiences help pre-service teachers connect theory with practice, while mentorship, feedback, belongingness, and emotional support play crucial roles in their professional growth. The study recommends strengthened school-university partnerships, structured mentoring, reflective conferences, and well-being support mechanisms for pre-service teachers.

I. Introduction

The deployment of pre-service teachers in basic education schools is one of the most meaningful stages of teacher preparation. It provides future teachers with opportunities to experience actual classroom life, apply pedagogical theories, interact with learners, manage instructional challenges, and understand the realities of the teaching profession. While university coursework equips pre-service teachers with foundational knowledge, it is during field deployment that they begin to experience

the complexities of teaching as a lived professional practice.

In the Philippine context, pre-service teacher deployment in DepEd schools exposes future educators to diverse learners, varied classroom conditions, school routines, mentor expectations, and community-based educational realities. These experiences are especially important in public elementary schools where learners differ in academic readiness, behavior, socio-economic

background, language use, and learning needs. For pre-service teachers, the transition from theory to practice is often accompanied by excitement, anxiety, adjustment, and self-discovery.

Existing studies affirm that practicum experiences shape teacher learning, professional identity, confidence, and resilience. Research on practicum and professional identity emphasizes that mentor support and school-based experiences influence how pre-service teachers see themselves as future educators. Studies also show that practicum can create stress and emotional pressure, but it can strengthen resilience when pre-service teachers receive support, feedback, and opportunities for reflection. In the Philippines, studies on pre-service teachers' practice teaching experiences highlight the importance of making sense of teaching through actual classroom participation, reflection, and interaction with learners and mentors.

Despite these studies, there remains a need to understand the lived experiences of pre-service teachers deployed in specific local public school contexts. This study therefore focused on pre-service teachers assigned to Echague East Central School, Echague West Central School, Echague South Central School, and Soyung Elementary School. It examined how deployment shaped their teaching practices, professional identity, and well-being.

2. Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do pre-service teachers describe their lived experiences during deployment in DepEd elementary schools?
2. What challenges and opportunities do they encounter during school deployment?
3. How do deployment experiences influence their professional identity formation?
4. How do pre-service teachers sustain their well-being during the practicum period?
5. What implications may be drawn for improving teacher education deployment programs?

3. Review of Related Literature

Teaching Deployment as a Bridge between Theory and Practice

Teaching deployment or practicum is widely considered a crucial component of teacher education because it allows pre-service teachers to apply university-acquired knowledge in authentic classroom settings. Through practicum, future teachers learn that teaching is not only lesson planning and content delivery but also classroom management, learner engagement, assessment, communication, and professional judgment. Studies on practicum experiences indicate that actual teaching exposure often challenges pre-service

teachers' assumptions and helps them develop practical wisdom .

Professional Identity Formation

Professional identity refers to how pre-service teachers understand themselves as future members of the teaching profession. It develops through experience, reflection, feedback, and interaction with learners, mentor teachers, and school communities. Izadinia's study showed that mentor teachers play a significant role in shaping pre-service teachers' professional identity during placement . More recent research also confirms that mentorship helps student teachers develop confidence, professional values, and a clearer understanding of teacher roles .

Mentorship, Feedback, and Reflective Practice

Mentorship provides emotional, instructional, and professional support during deployment. Constructive feedback helps pre-service teachers improve their teaching strategies, while reflective practice allows them to evaluate their decisions and learn from classroom experiences. A phenomenological study on pre-service teachers' feedback experiences found that feedback contributes to instructional confidence, reflective practice, and professional identity development .

Well-Being and Resilience during Practicum

Teaching deployment can be emotionally demanding. Pre-service teachers may experience stress due to workload, classroom management, lesson preparation,

evaluation, and self-doubt. However, studies show that resilience, social support, and well-being interventions can help pre-service teachers cope with practicum demands . Philippine-based research also identified workload, student behavior, cooperating teacher concerns, and time pressure as common stressors among practice teachers .

Belongingness in the School Community

A sense of belonging during practicum influences confidence and engagement. When pre-service teachers feel accepted by mentor teachers, learners, and school personnel, they are more likely to participate actively and view themselves as legitimate members of the school community. Dewhurst and colleagues found that belonging and non-belonging significantly shape pre-service teachers' practicum experiences .

4. Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on **Experiential Learning Theory** and **Professional Identity Theory**.

Experiential Learning Theory explains that learning occurs through concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. In this study, pre-service teachers learned by experiencing actual teaching, reflecting on classroom events, revising instructional strategies, and applying new approaches.

Professional Identity Theory explains that teacher identity develops through the interaction of personal beliefs, professional expectations, social relationships, and

institutional experiences. During deployment, pre-service teachers gradually moved from seeing themselves as students to seeing themselves as future professional teachers.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of pre-service teachers during their deployment in Philippine basic education settings. Phenomenology was deemed appropriate as it seeks to capture the meanings, perceptions, and interpretations that individuals attach to their experiences, particularly as they transition from theoretical preparation to actual teaching practice. The study was conducted in four public elementary schools in Echague, Isabela, namely Echague East Central School, Echague West Central School, Echague South Central School, and Soyung Elementary School. These schools served as the deployment sites where pre-service teachers engaged in authentic teaching experiences, including classroom instruction, lesson planning, classroom observation, learner interaction, school participation, and mentorship activities. The participants consisted of pre-service teachers assigned to these schools during their practice teaching period. Using purposive sampling, participants were selected based on their direct involvement in school deployment and their willingness to share meaningful accounts of their experiences.

Data were gathered through a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit

participants' narratives regarding their teaching experiences, challenges encountered, professional identity formation, mentoring relationships, interactions with learners, emotional well-being, and reflections on becoming future educators. To enrich the data, reflective journals and field notes were also utilized. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the concerned authorities, and participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical safeguards. Interviews were conducted with participants' consent, audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following a systematic process of familiarization with the data, coding significant statements, identifying patterns and recurring meanings, generating themes, and interpreting the essence of participants' lived experiences. Throughout the conduct of the study, ethical principles were strictly observed, including voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and respect for participants' rights and welfare. Participants were assured that their identities would remain protected and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Through these methodological procedures, the study sought to provide a comprehensive and trustworthy understanding of how pre-service teachers navigate the transition from theory to practice during their field deployment.

6. Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Confronting the Realities of Classroom Teaching

The findings revealed that pre-service teachers encountered significant adjustments when transitioning from university-based learning to actual classroom teaching. While participants entered deployment with theoretical knowledge of lesson planning, classroom management, and instructional strategies, they quickly realized that real classrooms required immediate decision-making, flexibility, and responsiveness to diverse learner needs.

One participant shared:

“Akala ko kapag handa na ang lesson plan, madali na ang pagtuturo. Pero noong nasa classroom na ako, doon ko nakita na kailangan mong mag-isip agad kapag hindi naiintindihan ng mga bata ang lesson.”

This finding suggests that deployment served as a reality-testing experience where pre-service teachers moved beyond idealized perceptions of teaching. Similar findings were reported by Manicio and Baetiong (2023), who found that practicum experiences exposed pre-service teachers to the complex realities of classroom instruction and challenged their preconceived notions about teaching. Likewise, Tanguihan (2021) emphasized that authentic teaching experiences enable pre-service teachers to recognize the multifaceted nature of the teaching profession, particularly in managing learner diversity and classroom dynamics.

Furthermore, Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory explains that meaningful

learning occurs when individuals engage in concrete experiences followed by reflection and adaptation. The classroom challenges encountered by participants provided opportunities for experiential learning, allowing them to refine their instructional practices based on real-world situations. This finding is consistent with the study of Yuan and Lee (2014), which revealed that practicum experiences contribute significantly to the development of professional competence because they expose pre-service teachers to authentic teaching contexts.

The findings indicate that actual classroom exposure is indispensable in teacher preparation because it enables pre-service teachers to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application.

Theme 2: Translating Theory into Adaptive Teaching Practice

Another significant theme that emerged was the development of adaptive teaching practices. Participants reported that although educational theories and instructional models provided useful foundations, actual classroom situations required continuous modifications and adjustments to accommodate learners' varying abilities, interests, and learning styles.

One participant stated:

“May mga strategies kaming natutuhan sa college, pero hindi lahat ay eksaktong

magagamit. Kailangan mong baguhin depende sa level ng mga bata.”

The findings suggest that effective teaching involves contextualizing pedagogical knowledge rather than rigidly applying theoretical models. Participants demonstrated the ability to modify instructional approaches, simplify concepts, and utilize alternative teaching techniques based on learner responses. This adaptive competence reflects pedagogical flexibility, which is considered a critical characteristic of effective teachers.

The result corroborates the findings of Darling-Hammond (2017), who argued that teacher preparation programs should emphasize adaptive expertise rather than routine expertise, enabling future teachers to respond effectively to diverse classroom situations. Similarly, Flores (2016) found that practicum experiences encourage pre-service teachers to integrate pedagogical theories with practical classroom realities, leading to deeper professional learning.

Moreover, the findings support the work of Beijaard et al. (2004), who asserted that professional identity develops through the continuous negotiation between theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Through deployment, participants learned that effective teaching requires not only content mastery but also sensitivity to learners’ needs and contextual factors.

Theme 3: Constructing Professional Identity through Mentorship and Feedback

Participants consistently emphasized the influence of mentor teachers on their professional growth and identity development. Cooperating teachers served as role models whose behaviors, instructional practices, and professional attitudes shaped participants’ perceptions of what it means to be an effective educator.

One participant explained:

“Malaki ang naitulong ng cooperating teacher ko kasi tinuruan niya ako kung paano humarap sa klase, paano magbigay ng instruction, at paano maging kalmado kahit maingay ang mga bata.”

The findings indicate that mentorship functions as a critical mechanism for professional identity formation. Through observation, coaching, feedback, and professional interactions, pre-service teachers gradually developed confidence in their teaching abilities and gained a clearer understanding of professional expectations.

This finding aligns with Izadinia (2015), who found that mentor teachers significantly influence pre-service teachers’ identity construction by providing guidance, support, and professional modeling. Similarly, Chea (2024) reported that mentorship enhances self-efficacy, professional confidence, and commitment to teaching among student teachers.

The role of feedback was also particularly important. Participants viewed constructive feedback as a valuable source of professional learning that helped them improve lesson delivery, classroom management, and learner engagement. This supports the findings of Hattie and Timperley (2007), who identified

feedback as one of the most influential factors affecting learning and professional development.

The findings therefore suggest that effective mentorship programs should be prioritized within teacher education institutions because they facilitate both competence development and professional identity formation.

Theme 4: Sustaining Emotional Well-Being amid Practicum Demands

Participants described deployment as both emotionally challenging and professionally rewarding. Feelings of anxiety, nervousness, self-doubt, and exhaustion were commonly experienced, particularly during classroom observations, demonstration teaching, and evaluation periods.

A participant reflected:

“Nakakapagod pero fulfilling. Minsan kinakabahan ako lalo na kapag may observation, pero kapag nakita kong natuto ang bata, nawawala ang pagod.”

The findings indicate that emotional well-being plays a crucial role in the success of pre-service teachers during deployment. Although participants experienced stress, they also developed coping mechanisms such as reflective journaling, peer support, prayer, time management, and consultation with mentor teachers.

These findings are consistent with the study of Krisdianata (2022), which found that resilience enables pre-service teachers to overcome practicum-related challenges and

maintain positive professional attitudes. Likewise, Bennett (2024) emphasized that emotional support systems significantly contribute to teacher well-being and retention.

In the Philippine context, Gutierrez (2020) reported that workload demands, learner behavior concerns, and performance evaluations constitute major stressors among practice teachers. However, supportive school environments and positive mentoring relationships help mitigate these stressors and promote resilience.

The findings highlight the need for teacher education institutions to incorporate well-being programs, stress management workshops, and psychosocial support initiatives into their deployment programs.

Theme 5: Developing Belongingness and Commitment to the Teaching Profession

The final theme illustrates how deployment strengthened participants' sense of belonging and commitment to the teaching profession. Initially, many participants felt uncertain about their role within the school community. However, as they established relationships with learners, mentor teachers, and school personnel, they gradually developed a sense of professional belonging.

One participant remarked:

“Noong una, nahihiya pa ako. Pero habang tumatagal, naramdaman kong bahagi na rin ako ng school lalo na kapag tinatawag na akong teacher ng mga bata.”

The findings suggest that belongingness contributes significantly to professional identity development. Being recognized as a teacher by learners and colleagues reinforced participants' confidence and strengthened their commitment to pursuing a teaching career.

This finding supports the study of Dewhurst et al. (2020), which found that a sense of belonging positively influences engagement, confidence, and professional growth among pre-service teachers. Similarly, Shand (2023) argued that professional identity emerges through participation in authentic educational communities where student teachers experience recognition, responsibility, and inclusion.

Furthermore, Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice Theory explains that professional identity develops through active participation in professional communities. Through deployment, participants moved from peripheral participation toward fuller membership within the teaching profession.

The findings therefore indicate that creating inclusive and supportive school environments can significantly enhance the professional development and retention of future teachers.

7. Conclusion

The study revealed that pre-service teacher deployment in Echague East Central School, Echague West Central School, Echague South Central School, and Soyung Elementary School served as a transformative bridge between theory and practice.

Participants experienced the realities of classroom teaching, learned to adapt instructional strategies, developed professional identity through mentorship, sustained emotional well-being through support and reflection, and strengthened their commitment to the teaching profession.

The findings show that deployment is not merely a technical requirement in teacher education. It is a formative journey where pre-service teachers begin to understand the heart of teaching: responding to learners, reflecting on practice, managing challenges, and becoming professionally responsible educators.

8. Recommendations

1. Teacher education institutions should strengthen pre-deployment orientation by preparing pre-service teachers for classroom management, learner diversity, and emotional challenges.
2. Cooperating teachers should be trained in mentoring, feedback-giving, and reflective coaching.
3. Regular reflection sessions should be conducted between pre-service teachers, supervisors, and cooperating teachers.
4. Well-being support mechanisms should be integrated into practicum programs.
5. Stronger partnerships between universities and DepEd schools

should be established to ensure consistent guidance and monitoring.

6. Future studies may explore the experiences of mentor teachers, school heads, and learners in relation to pre-service teacher deployment.

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