Challenges of Pre-service Teachers in K–12 Classrooms: An Explanatory Case Study

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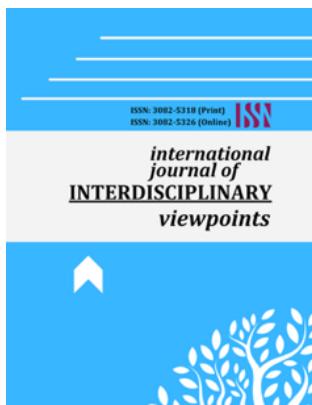[6]Department of Education, Cebu Province, Philippines
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Research Article

ABSTRACT

K–12 schools need qualified teachers, but it can be hard for them to transition from doing homework in college to working in a classroom. This qualitative, explanatory case study examines how and why teachers-to-be encounter challenges during their final practice in K–12 classes. The study uses semi-structured interviews, practicum documents, and field notes from future teachers who will be working with Grades 4–6 in a public K–12 school. It examines how teachers manage the classroom, make decisions about teaching and mentoring students, navigate their emotional experiences, and build their professional identities. The results show that pre-service teachers' problems are not just isolated technical issues. Instead, they are experiences shaped by the needs of the classroom, the quality of guidance, the limitations of the organization, and emotional work. The study shows how important it is to have clear mentorship systems, better blending of theory and practice, and conscious attention to the emotional aspects of learning to teach. It is talked about what this means for policies on teacher education, the creation of practicums, and relationships between schools and universities.

Keywords: education, practicum, pre-service teachers, classroom problems, coaching

INTRODUCTION

Many people agree that how well teachers are trained is a key factor in the quality of education. Students in official teacher education programs who are doing practicum or internships often find that what they learn in the classroom is very different from what they learn in the classroom through their studies. Early experiences as a teacher have a lasting effect on views, self-efficacy, professional identity, and long-term dedication to the job (Avalos, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). These experiences are not just opportunities to put theory into practice; they are also formative moments when future teachers grapple with uncertainty, duty, and meaning in real classrooms.

In K–12 settings, future teachers-to-be must manage a variety of students, the demands of the curriculum, classroom management challenges, and professional relationships, all while balancing the roles of student and teacher. For a long time, studies have shown that managing the classroom and making decisions about how to teach are difficult in practice, especially when future teachers lack much power or regular support (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Veenman, 1984). How pre-service teachers experience and think about these problems is also

affected by the quality of their mentors and by how well university standards and school practices align (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Zeichner, 2010).

There is a lot of research on common problems students face in practicums, but most of it discusses them in broad or combined terms. Not as much attention has been paid to how problems occur in individual schools and how teachers-to-be make sense of them as linked experiences. Early turnover has been linked to emotional stress and difficulties in professional identity (Hong, 2010; Zembylas, 2003), but the conditions that cause these effects are still not well understood.

This study uses Yin's explanatory case study logic to examine how and why pre-service teachers experience problems during their final practice in a specific K–12 school. By focusing on a limited case, the study aims to provide a more complete picture of how training conditions, problems faced, and the making of professional sense are connected.

Problem Statement

The internship is an important part of teacher education because it gives future teachers their first long-term experience teaching in a real classroom. Even though they have done a lot of schoolwork, many future teachers have problems during their practicum, especially with managing the classroom, making decisions about how to teach, seeking guidance, and adjusting emotionally. These problems often come up when future teachers are figuring out how to work in a classroom where their role is unclear—they are somewhere between a student and a teacher.

Even though a previous study found common problems with practicums, much of the literature treats these problems as separate or widespread. Not enough attention has been paid to how practicum problems are influenced by factors such as school settings, teaching methods, administrative conditions, and personal experiences. Because of this, we do not fully understand how and why these problems keep happening, or how pre-service teachers make sense of them during a significant time in their careers, when they are forming their professional identities.

To address this problem, this study uses an informative case study method to examine the types of problems pre-service teachers faced during their final practice in a K–12 school setting and the sources of those problems. Ultimately, the goal is to help improve teacher education programs' integration of practicum structures and mentoring methods.

Research Questions

1. How do future teachers talk about what they learned during their final practice in a K–12 classroom?
2. What problems do future teachers-to-be face during their training, especially when it comes to managing the classroom and making decisions about how to teach?
3. What effects do teaching practices and the general atmosphere in the school have on the practicum experiences of future teachers-to-be?
4. How do teachers-to-be understand these issues in terms of how they make them feel and how their work identities change over time?

Literature Review

Problems with managing the classroom and teaching

Managing the classroom remains one of the problems pre-service and new teachers most often discuss. Research shows that managing student behavior in real classes requires more than just academic knowledge. It also needs situational judgment, relationship skills, and the ability to make adaptable decisions. In his groundbreaking 1984 review, Veenman found that classroom order was the most critical factor for new teachers. This result is still supported by new research. The problems with instruction are also very complicated. Shulman (1987) said that pedagogical topic knowledge is more than just knowing a lot about a subject. It also means being able to change material in ways that all kinds of students can understand. When placed in real-life classroom situations, pre-service teachers often struggle with pacing, differentiation, and testing. This shows how inadequate decontextualized training is.

Situations for Mentoring and Practicum

Mentoring is an essential part of creating internship experiences. Research has shown that supportive guidance and training practices can help new teachers build confidence and remain in their jobs (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011;

Wang et al., 2008). On the other hand, teaching quality is not always consistent, often due to differences between what is taught in college and how things really work in schools (Zeichner, 2010). When mentoring is random or primarily focused on testing, pre-service teachers may experience greater confusion and fewer opportunities to learn in an organized way.

Emotional Experiences and Being a Professional
Being a teacher is hard on the emotions, and the training phase is especially challenging for people about to become teachers. Studies have shown that many people feel anxious, self-doubtful, and emotionally worn-out during practice teaching (Gorospe, 2022; Pendergast et al., 2011). According to Hong (2010), these feelings are closely connected to the formation of a professional personality and choices about whether to stay in a job. Zembylas (2003) said that emotions are a significant part of what it means to be a teacher because they affect how teachers make sense of their experiences and determine what their roles are in the field.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Design
The problems pre-service teachers encountered during their final practice experience were examined using a qualitative explanatory case study method. An informative case study is a good way to examine real-life events in real-world settings, especially when it is hard to distinguish the thing being studied from its surroundings.
Locale
Pre-service teachers were put in Grades 4–6 classrooms in a single public K–12 school for their final practice. This was the only group under investigation. They did this practicum for one school term, a necessary period of change before they graduated.
Sampling
The volunteers were future elementary school teachers pursuing their bachelor's degrees. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were in their final internship and ready to discuss their experiences. They used fake names, like PST–1, to hide their real names.
Data Gathering
Interviews, framework, training paperwork, and field notes were used to gather data. The talks covered experiences in classroom management, teaching methods, mentoring, dealing with mental health issues, and finding one's work identity. Every conversation lasted 45-60 minutes and was typed up word-for-word.
Data Analysis
We used thematic analysis to examine the data, focusing on how the subjects' feelings were connected to the situation. Coding efforts were mainly focused on identifying patterns related to practical problems and the meaning-making processes that accompany them. Three different types of data were used to support the results, which made them more reliable.
Trustworthiness
The study was reliable because it used multiple sources of information, had participants check each other's work, had participants keep reflective journals, and maintained an audit trail. In addition, ethical approval was obtained, and all participants provided informed consent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Interviews, practicum papers, and field notes were analyzed, and four themes emerged that show what challenges pre-service teachers faced during their final fieldwork and why they happened. These themes show how experiences are shaped by the facts of the classroom, mentoring methods, the limits of the organization, and emotional stresses.

Managing the classroom is always a problem
Managing the classroom turned out to be the most urgent and ongoing problem for everyone. Even though they had done homework before, participants said it was hard to use theory methods in classrooms that were not always predictable. Uncertainty and mental stress were made worse by unclear roles and limited power, which pre-service teachers encountered. Participants saw classroom management problems not as a result of not knowing how to do it, but as stemming from the complexity of the situation and the way power works in the classroom.

Making decisions in the classroom when you are limited
Challenges in the classroom were described as constant discussions between the planned lessons and what actually happened in the school. The participants were sure they knew a lot about the topic, but they had trouble

with pace, differentiating, and meeting the needs of different students. There was not much room for flexibility in the lessons due to time constraints and a set program. This made it clearer that the problems stemmed from the practice's structure, not from insufficient preparation.

Mentoring as a Type of Support That Can Change
Mentoring experiences were very different, and they turned out to be a key factor in training experiences. Supportive tutoring relationships, marked by regular comments and talks about what participants had learned, helped them see problems as chances to learn. On the other hand, mentoring that was restricted or primarily focused on review made things less specific and slowed down professional growth.

Stress and the Formation of a Professional Identity
There was a strong link between emotional discomfort and practicum events and the formation of a professional identity. People often said they felt anxious, tired, and unsure of themselves, especially when they thought they were not doing well enough. Still, some people saw these problems in a new way as an essential part of their professional growth as teachers. These emotional events were significant in shaping how the volunteers saw themselves as teachers.

How it Fits in with Research Questions
Overall, the results show that practicum teaching was not seen as a simple application of academic ideas (RQ1). Instead, it was seen as emotionally draining and uncertain. Contextual and structural factors (RQ2) affected how the classroom was run and how well lessons were taught, and the quality of coaching was a key factor in addressing these problems (RQ3). Emotional events were significant to how participants made sense of their lives and built their working identities (RQ4).

Effects on how teachers are trained
This study used an explanatory case study to examine the kinds of problems pre-service teachers encountered during their final practice in a K–12 school and the sources of those problems. Problems that arose during the practicum were not just technical, as the data show; they also had deep roots in social and governmental settings. You can examine these issues through the lens of well-known theories of teaching, guidance, and professional development. The themes raised in this conversation-based, theory-based talk help us understand important theoretical ideas in teacher education. There are many problems with classroom management, which supports the idea that what teachers know is really situated and depends on the context. Before the volunteers started the training, they had a general idea of how to run a classroom. However, it was hard for them to use these ideas in classes that did not always work. This finding supports Evertson and Weinstein's (2006) view that managing a classroom is more than just knowing what to do. It also means changing to new events and making choices based on relationships.

Veenman's 1984 study on new teachers' fears adds to the body of theory. School order remains significant because it concerns respect, authority, and how power operates. The study adds to this point of view by showing how the temporary nature of pre-service teachers exacerbated these issues. Problems with classroom management were not just because teachers had not been well-trained; they were also caused by the school's setup not aligning with expectations for new teachers. This supports the idea that running a classroom is more of a socially accepted habit than a set of skills that can be applied in different settings. Shulman's (1987) theory of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) examines how information is organized so that students can understand it. This theory can help us figure out why students were having trouble with their lessons. They said they knew a lot about the subject but had trouble making their lessons fit the needs of all their students, their limited time, and the school's standards. This comment brings up the developmental side of PCK, which, as Shulman said, cannot be fully developed through official homework alone but only through doing tasks in class repeatedly.

The results also back up Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2002) claim that teachers need to connect theory and practice in real schools so that students can learn better. On the other hand, this study also shows that blending was more complex due to factors such as the required curriculum and teachers' inability to do what they wanted. It was thought that problems with teaching happened because students had different ideas about what they were learning and how those ideas affected the situation. Pedagogical subject knowledge (PCK) changes over time, but it is affected by what the school can and cannot do in practice settings.

What part does coaching play in helping people grow professionally? Mentoring proved to be an important academic process that influenced how future teachers solved problems during their practicums. People who received regular, thoughtful advice reported feeling more secure and advancing in their careers, which aligns with the mentoring and induction theory (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Wang et al., 2008). When these things happened, teaching was there to help people make sense of it all, think about it, and learn from their mistakes. When coaching was restricted or focused primarily on judging, people felt less sure of themselves and had fewer opportunities to grow in a guided way. Zeichner's (2010) critique of the gap between what happens on campus and in the field is a helpful way to think about this finding. This study's different levels of teaching quality show that guidance is important not only as a support system but also as a creative factor that changes how people can learn. From a scholarly perspective, mentoring emerged as an important factor linking environmental factors to the different career outcomes of pre-service teachers.

There is evidence that teaching is both emotionally taxing and helps people figure out who they are, which means that practicums can be stressful. Some studies have shown that practice teaching can be hard on people's emotions, leading to feelings of stress, fatigue, and self-doubt (Gorospe, 2022; Pendergast et al., 2011). However, if you look at these results through the lens of Zembylas (2003), feelings stop being personal issues people have to deal with and become important for building professional identities. The results support Hong's (2010) claim that teachers' early emotional experiences shape who they are and how dedicated they become to their jobs over time. This research found a close link between emotional stress, company standards, and the level of mentoring. The pre-service teachers' feelings may have indicated how well or poorly they were matched to their work environments. From an academic perspective, professional identity emerged as a social construct that shifted with how people felt during their practicums. The findings show that professional development, guidance, and emotional events all play a part in how workers become who they are in practicum settings. There were disagreements about how to run and teach the classroom, where academic understanding met the real-world constraints of the school. People learned to handle these issues with the help of mentors, but how they felt about them determined whether they saw them as mistakes or opportunities to grow. This study adds to what is known about teacher education by showing that classroom issues are more likely to stem from how different academic processes interact than from single flaws. It was discovered that becoming a teacher is a process built on personality and influenced by situational factors, social support, and making mental sense. This is why this point of view emphasizes the importance of practicums that cover not only technical skills but also the social, mental, and community aspects of becoming a teacher. The results make it clear that teacher education programs need to improve the link between theory and practice, especially when it comes to making decisions about how to run the classroom and what to teach. Strong, helpful mentoring programs are necessary to help future teachers learn and stay emotionally healthy. Policies for teacher education should make teaching jobs more straightforward and focus on assisting students to grow rather than on grades.

When schools and universities work together, both parties must participate in planning the practice and guiding students. Mentoring practices may be more reliable if cooperating teachers and university leaders regularly communicate and participate in professional development together. The emotional aspects of learning to teach should be incorporated into the practicum through tasks that prompt reflection and ways to get help.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study examined how and why pre-service teachers encountered difficulties during their final practice in classes for grades 4–6. The results show that these problems are not just separate technical issues. Classroom needs, mentoring practices, societal constraints, and emotional work also shape them. Contexts of practicums help explain both why problems keep occurring and how teachers-to-be understand and address them.

Getting these problems solved will take coordinated efforts to ensure that the formats of coursework, practicums, coaching, and mental support are aligned. Teacher education programs and partnerships between schools and universities can help more people enter the field and, in the long run, improve the quality of teaching by focusing on both the academic and emotional aspects of learning to teach.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest in the preparation and publication of this research.

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