

Teaching in the midst of the pandemic: Insights and perspectives from the lenses of the pre-service teachers

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of the pre-service teachers in their student teaching (ST) program are crucial as they bridge the divergence between their dependence to their cooperating teacher under the wings of their four-year teacher training program and their emancipatory leap towards autonomy in the field of actual teaching. This study was designed to document the experiences of the pre-service teachers in their pandemic ST for the school year 2020-2021. Describing their experiences and identifying factors contributing to their experiences are ways of analyzing this phenomenal issue in our educational state. Employing the qualitative research design using Phenomenology as point of inquiry, 18 pre-service teachers eloquently narrated their experiences in this pandemic education. The following experiences are documented: challenging and engaging, experiences are superficial, ST is best done via face-to-face, and ST is hopeless this pandemic. On the other hand, the known factors affecting the informants' pandemic education experiences include poor internet connectivity, lack of gadgets, technological know-how, feedback is not enough, and inattentive, distracted students. Based on the foregoing results and on the parameters of this study, it is concluded that the pre-service teachers who had their ST in the school year 2020-2021 in a state university in the Philippines did not practice well as they were confronted with mounting roadblocks in optimizing their potentials in teaching. It is further recommended that a revision on the current framework of the program is necessary in order to fully optimize the learning experiences of pre-service teachers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Field study (FS), or the so-called student teaching (ST) program, is an activity that culminates the four-year teacher training of pre-service teachers. These pre-service teachers are usually immersed in a cooperating school with an assigned school head (SH) and cooperating teacher (CT). With them around during the entire ST program, the pre-service teachers maximized their potentials and readiness to enter the actual field of teaching. Experiences in handling and managing a class shape their potentials and teaching acumen into a bar-none perspective which in turn develop their abilities in teaching.

However, the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 delimited Delivering Higher Education Institutions (DHEIs) to implement onsite ST program. In return, DHEIs developed alternative programs to complement the acquisition of competencies, skills, and abilities expected of a pre-service teacher after

finishing a degree program in teacher education. In the current study, the pre-service teachers are handling at least one tutee within their vicinity which serves as their study class. Actual lesson development is video graphed for documentation and evaluation purposes by their supervising instructors. This practice is a deviation from the standard placement and matrix of ST in a teacher training program here and abroad. Usually, pre-service teachers start as a shadow of their CTs and gradually takes over the responsibility of managing and teaching the whole class [1].

Apparently, this pandemic is challenging the implementation of the ST program. The preparation of the DHEIs and the pre-service teachers in the whole course of the program—the provision of a meaningful field experiences is a big challenge as the presence of SH and CT in a physical classroom is no longer possible and allowed [2]. Hence, the migration of the onsite ST program to the new modalities of the pandemic [3].

Aptly, the abilities of every teacher, including the pre-service teachers, are never undaunted. Teachers are highly adaptable and always on the go to navigate things that challenge their ability and superiority in delivering quality education despite this pandemic. This study tries to mend the gap on the disparity in terms of the pandemic experiences of pre-service teachers from the ideal scenario of their ST program so as to recommend a better framework to further the program in the next years to come.

The crux is ST program under the helm of the pre-service teachers' four-year teacher training brings a breadth outlook in their noblest tasks as professional teachers as they enrich their professional know-how through deliberate and formative experiences from the wings of their CTs. This is expected to shape their professional understanding on the multi-faceted teaching and learning. In turn, it makes their vista of becoming an effective and efficient teacher who navigates things in delivering quality and relevant education.

This study is designed to document the experiences of the pre-service teachers in their pandemic ST for the school year 2020-2021 in a state university in the Philippines. The output of this study may impinge an improved policy on the conduct of ST for the next batch of pre-service teachers in the locale of the study as this pandemic is expected to stay and will affect the program in the next few more years. Specifically, it aimed to: i) describe the experiences of pre-service teachers on their pandemic ST program and ii) capture factors affecting the academic experiences of the informants on their pandemic ST program.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development [4] explains that learning is a social and collaborative experience. He explains the concepts of the zone of actual development and scaffolding thru the more knowledgeable others (MKOs) and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). While it is true that student-teachers are already equipped with knowledge on the different pedagogies in the T-L process (zone of actual development), they still need the cooperating teacher (as MKO) to assist and guide them (scaffolding) develop the different skills needed in the actual teaching (ZPD). Apparently, MKOs hasten the acquisition of the desired skills, techniques, and strategies in addressing innate procedures and process of the dynamic classroom. As a result, MKOs play a significant role in the ST program of the pre-service teachers in making it more significant, focused, and optimal—all for their holistic total growth and development.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed the qualitative research design using Phenomenology as strategy for inquiry. The informants of this study, where the qualitative data came from, were the pre-service teachers who had their ST program during the school year (SY) 2020-2021 in a state university in the Philippines (18 pre-service teachers volunteered to join the researchers as informants). They came from various academic programs of the university who vouched that they successfully completed their ST during the school year. This is the main qualification for them to become key informants of this study. The informants explained their experiences including a configural mode of understanding and principles—the meanings of their stories and experiences as part of an identity development [5]. They eloquently narrated their experiences in a focus group discussion (FGD).

The proponents personally interviewed the informants to gather the needed data in the study. Before the interview was conducted, the interviewers briefed the informants that their participation in the interview is voluntary and they can terminate it anytime. A consent form was signed by the informants. The transcripts of the interview were carefully transcribed and coded which were then validated by a researcher whose credibility is beyond compare.

Audit trail was employed in routing the transcripts of the interview to the informants in ascertaining the veracity of the claims. Audit trail is an in-depth approach to illustrating that the transcripts are based on the participants' narratives. It also involved a description on how the data were gathered and analyzed [6], [7]. The transcribed data were routed back among the informants after the transcription process to ascertain the veracity of their claims during the interview and FGD sessions—100% of the transcripts were documented and processed via audit trail. Moreover, the informants agreed on the transcriptions and vouched for the

veracity of the content presented therein to be analogous to what they intend to express. Henceforth, the data are considered verified and valid.

Moreover, the gathered data were analyzed through thematic analysis. It is an approach in qualitative data analysis that systematically and rigorously synthesizing unequivocal qualitative data into curated and connected findings in a thematic framework of analysis and presentation [8]. Aptly, the analysis done in the research includes familiarization and organization, coding and recoding, and summarizing and interpreting [9].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The experiences of the pre-service teachers in their ST program are crucial. They bridge the divergence between their dependence to their cooperating teacher under the wings of their four-year teacher training program and their emancipatory leap towards autonomy in the field actual teaching [10]. In this particular stage, pre-service teachers need to accumulate experiences relevant to their future tasks as full-fledged teachers. The shift on the framework and procedure of ST program brought about the COVID-19 pandemic is not sounding as a swift solution to its current state. The admissions and disclosures of the informants of this study show that there is a problem on the delivery system of the program as to their preparation in using technologies and other infrastructures and in engaging their students.

3.1. Experiences of the pre-service teachers in their pandemic ST program

3.1.1. Challenging and engaging

Student teaching marks a significant milestone on the journey of every pre-service teacher in the world of teaching. Since teaching is a dynamic world of work and works, it is seen to be challenging as it engages a number of mounting roadblocks which will sharpen their mental acumen towards their delivery. Student teachers, in the locale of this study, are placed in a situation where they have to adjust and adapt to the new normal in education. It is evident that they applied the assimilation and accommodation in the cognitive development theory of Piaget [11]. Aptly, they applied their prior knowledge and tried to fit in with the current situations of teaching.

Furthermore, this pandemic teaching challenges the informants' abilities to adapt and adopt with the intricate world of teaching which is too far from their mode of preparation. Let it be noted that their actual experiences are deviations from their preparation. Informant 6 and 7 admitted their indulgence to adapt with the norm of the current framework of education, the pandemic norms. On the other hand, Informants 6, 4, and 15 elucidated that their main challenge is to engage their learners since they are not in a structured physical class. Their profound admission casts a deep understanding on their act of involving every learner in the teaching-and-learning process (TLP). The following transcripts from the informants qualify the claim of this study that ST is challenging and engaging:

"...online delivery is challenging. I needed to adapt with the unique challenges of this new normal, pandemic learning ..." S7

"This is challenging, I needed to adjust and adapt the new normal of educating learners..." S6

"This is challenging and engaging as well in creating a paperless learning environment..." S12

"...Going online is engaging..." S6

"...the challenge for me this pandemic is how to engage my tutees as we are not in a structured class..." S15

"...This is challenging on my part. I was challenged to engage my tutees. I strategized based on the suggestions of my CT..." S4

Teaching in this pandemic is divided by technology, technological know-how, online approaches in teaching and learning, including the preparation of the pre-service teachers which test their capacity and adaptability on the challenges of online learning—the new normal of education. Albeit intricate, teachers found synergy in using the online platform in delivering their lessons so as not to stop education, and so with the pre-service teachers in their ST program. A number of studies were conducted and suggested similar points: teaching in the midst of this pandemic is rewarding, challenging in terms of using e-learning platforms and engaging and motivating learners [1], [2], [12], [13].

3.1.2. Experiences are superficial

The ST program is an avenue that offers an array of surmountable experiences relevant to their quest of becoming a professional teacher. As such, each experience earned by the pre-service teachers during this phase of their education must be contributory to their total personal and professional development. However,

the ST program in this pandemic is deviated to the realms of restrictions formulated by the governing board of DHEIs like in the case of the current study. The admissions of the informants impinge that their experiences did not optimize their potentials. Informant 4 scratched the idea of holding a lot of what ifs as he finishes her ST program while Informant 15 admitted the need to immerse with the real set-up, students, and class size. Moreover, the claims of the informants are clear admissions that they did not maximize the time to learn things in as much as they can to improve their craft in teaching. The following transcripts from the informants qualify the claim of this study that the experiences of the informants from their ST is superficial:

“... I can say that my experiences are all superficial because everything is assumed. I think I did not maximize my time to learn things in the actual field...” S17

“... It is not enough. I think I am not well developed and totally, I am not immersed with multi-faceted teaching...” S16

“... I did not learn the practical aspect of teaching. I think my ST is superficial, half-baked. I had to learn more from this ST. I do not know; I will just swim the ocean when I get there. I have a lot of what ifs now...” S4

“... this is ineffective and superficial as I know that I need to learn more. We need to be immersed with the real set-up, real students, and real class size, everything...” S15

Researchers claimed that there is no substitute on the practical experiences learned by the student teachers in the actual field. Accordingly, experiences from a controlled environment do not guaranty similar and total attributes of the real teaching and process [14]–[16]. In the current study, the informants' students are their tutees or their relatives who reside near to their proximity. These are clear manifestation of superficial teaching experiences which in no way considered real scenario of teaching and learning.

The foregoing results can be averred to be intertwined with Kolb's Experiential Learning. Aptly, the informants are in the stage of Abstract of Conceptualization [17]. Accordingly, they are in a gamut of reflection that gives rise to a new idea or a modification of an existing situation. As perceived by them, their experiences are superficial. However, it can be noted that they draw new idea, concept, and learning avenue as explicated by Informant 4.

Moreover, it also relates to Dewey's experiential learning theory [18]. There is synergy and absolute, empirical value of learning things in their natural setting just like in the case of the current study. The informants need to be immersed in the natural setting for them to gain knowledge, skills, and competencies in the intricate TLP—the professional know-hows. Hence, student teachers prefer for a face-to-face classroom teaching to be able to experience the actual scenario in a real classroom set up.

3.1.3. ST is best done via face-to-face

Student teacher (ST) program offers immersive experiences that sharpens the capacity, ability, including the adaptability of the pre-service teachers as they hone their craft in teaching. This is the normal norm of the program. However, things deviate as our educative protocols are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The immersion of the pre-service teacher to the actual field is paramount to a pole-vaulting leap that can transcend their vista towards the TLP. The indulgence of SH and CT plays a critical role in the total development of the pre-service teachers. Their activities and experiences under their unique guidance, assistance and formative feedback are all contributory factors in their total development. Informant 11 elucidated well the need of a CT in this professional training. On the other hand, Informants 2, 4, 9, 15, 16, and 17 accorded that their potential learning may had been optimized should their ST program was conducted onsite, the traditional face-to-face ST program. It is broad as the day light then that the pre-service teachers need to be immersed in an actual avenue so they can master their craft in teaching. The following transcripts from the informants qualify the claim of this study that ST is best done via face-to-face mechanism:

“... It is difficult when nobody guides you like the normal days of ST. I did not learn much. I still prefer the old one, a CT is assigned to guide me with the students around...” S11

“... I could have learned and practice well if I were deployed in a school just like before...” S2

“... Practice teaching (in this set-up) is not fulfilling. I know that I can do better if I taught them face-to-face...” S3

“... I could have learned better for my ST if it was conducted face-to-face...” S5

“... I could have learned many aspects of ST if I had it through face-to-face (onsite) like handling a large group of students, how to process answers and behaviors of students...” S4

“... I wanted to experience the real school set-up, learning to tailor instant strategies based on the nature and behavior of students, and of course how to handle students...” S9

“... I wanted to feel and learn the intricacies of teaching which I could have been experienced when I had my ST face-to-face, deployed in DepEd...” S15

“... I still prefer face-to-face for ST. CTs are there to guide you all the time; real time experience on classroom management and interacting with students are natural...” S14

“... Face-to-face is still preferred. I could have mastered classroom management and on how to deal with students if I had my face-to-face ST...” S16

“... My experiences could have been better if I had my ST in face-to-face modality. I could have trained with social skills and the confidence to handle a large group of students...” S17

The research of reference [2] claimed that the skillsets of student teachers in this pandemic is flipped. It was also claimed that they master less for classroom management, teaching strategies, among others that could only be observed, strategized, and honed in a real classroom setting. Furthermore, it was claimed that the physical classroom is still the richest context of learning [19], [20].

Corollary to Dale’s cone of experience [21], it is posited that people generally remember 90% of what they actually do. In the case of the current study, the informants earned minimal experience capitalizing on the theoretical aspects and background of the competencies and skills that need to master. Based on the foregoing, it can be averred that the informants may soon forget their experiences as they seem to be superficial with mediocrity in educational setting.

Moreover, it also relates to Dewey’s experiential learning theory [18]. There is synergy and absolute, empirical value of learning things in their natural setting just like in the case of the current study. The informants need to be immersed in the natural setting for them to gain knowledge, skills, and competencies in the intricate TLP—the professional know-hows. Hence, student teachers prefer for a face-to-face classroom teaching to be able to experience the actual scenario in a real classroom set up.

3.1.4. ST is hopeless this pandemic

One of the important aspects of ST program is the interplay between the pre-service teacher and the students. The frustrations of the informants hold drawbacks on their morale since they are not in a structured, physical classroom with a defined rule to observe. The informants come in different perspectives of losing hope in their ST program: losing hope because of not learning much (Informant 8), losing hope due to inability to make ends meet (Informant 16), and losing hope because of a feeling of being helpless and abandoned by their tutees (Informant 9). These admissions of the informants prove that teachers are also social and rational being. The following transcripts from the informants qualify the claim of this study that ST is hopeless this pandemic:

“... I am hopeless, this PT makes me hopeless because of this pandemic. I did not learn much...” S8

“... I am losing hope. I am financially broke. I had poor connection. I cannot establish rapport with my tutees. I do not know...” S16

“... I lost hope when my tutees retracted. I know that they do not have the obligation to report to me regularly. It is difficult...” S9

The study of reference [22] claimed that schooling in this pandemic has caused a serious impact on the mental health and will play uncertain impact on their career after their graduation. In fact, these pandemic experiences will leave a tremendous stress and uncertainty that will hum among them. Apparently, this stress may lead unfavorable conditions in the informants’ morale, internal drive, including their psychological health [23]. Therefore, students in this pandemic need social care as suggested by the study of reference [12].

3.2. Factors affecting the experiences of the pre-service teachers in their ST program

3.2.1. Poor internet connectivity

Internet plays a crucial role in online learning. At times, it controls the productivity of the players in their tasks in the current study. Thus, internet fuels the current learning topography anywhere in the globe. Informant 1 averred that it controlled his productivity during his ST program while Informant 5 found difficulty in reaching out his students. To many, it is difficult to go online when the connection is poor. It is claimed that online learning should be offered with a strong internet connectivity if it is to be successful and engaging. The following transcripts from the informants qualify the claim of this study that one of the factors that affected their experiences in their ST is internet connectivity:

- “... Internet connectivity is the main problem. I found difficulty in reaching out my students, and even my classmates...” S5*
- “... I am confronted with my finances. Internet rental is high...” S13*
- “... My internet connectivity controls my productivity. I needed to look for a place with strong connection all the time whenever I go for online teaching...” S1*
- “... Internet is not good. It is difficult to go online...” S8*
- “... PT is hard, I needed to go online but I got poor internet...” S10*
- “... I needed to have good internet...” S7*

The studies of previous researchers [24], [25] claimed that internet controls the learning opportunities in the countryside of the Philippines. Moreover, they also claimed that students spend much on their internet fee and rentals. With these problems, the learning engagement of the students are controlled as many students in the country have unstable internet access including limited electronic device [26].

3.2.2. Lack of gadgets for the online class

Aside from internet connectivity, students including teachers need gadgets for their online class in this pandemic, i.e., laptops, smartphones, and other information communication technology (ICT) infrastructure. In the case of the informants of this study, they found difficult times in doing their online ST program as they are limited to their resources. Having good gadgets like laptops and smartphones is paramount to successful tasks of online teaching as they customize their teaching procedures with the array of benefits offered by an excellent gadget. Let it be noted that most of their activities are into videos. The following transcripts from the informants qualify the claim of this study that one of the factors that affected their experiences in their ST is their lack of gadgets for online classes:

- “... I needed to have good gadgets...” S7*
- “... I do not have laptop or smartphone to do the video lesson. I am borrowing from my classmate after finishing his activities...” S16*
- “... My professor and my CT did not know that I do not have laptop to use. I am burdened with this. I cannot go online; I cannot do my requirements on time...” S14*
- “... I do not have a laptop, no projector, no smart TV at home. I do not know how to exude digitization in my class. It is ironic though because my class is ICT...” S18*

Gadgets are necessary in going online as learning materials and discussions are offered freely-open via the net or any portal. Instructional materials and discussion boards which are the keys for acquisition of content-knowledge and skills are laid openly anytime and anywhere which is an attribute of an online learning. Online learning therefore is claimed as cost-effective modality as learning materials are offered freely [27]. Henceforth, the availability of gadgets like smartphones, tablets, laptops, and desktop computers helps in going online in this pandemic.

3.2.3. Technological know-how

One of the attributes of a 21st century teacher is the technical know-how to exude digitization among student-learners. As such, teachers, including the pre-service teachers, need to showcase technological know-how to impinge innovation in the classroom. The informants' admissions that they lack preparation and training in online learning is paramount to a dislocated milieu on their functions as teacher-facilitators. Doubting one's capability as accorded by Informant 3 is a manifestation of inability to do better. These affordances by the informant form cloud on their ability to manage an online class. The following transcripts from the informants qualify the claim of this study that one of the factors that affected their experiences in their ST is their inability to use technologies.

- “... I am confronted with my technological know-how – students and teachers are learning together...” S3*
- “... I am not prepared for this online teaching. We had out EdTech, yes! But other preparations, we did not have. I struggled to do online class, video lessons, etc...” S9*
- “... I had hoped that we will be trained to do video lesson. I struggled for this...” S16*

The technological aspect of teaching and learning in this pandemic is a strong divide in the success of education at any point and angle of inquiry. The informants tend to adapt with the technological implications of this pandemic in order for them to maximize their [28], [29]. This concordance is new in the locale of the current study as the informants are prepared to undergo residential teaching and less that they

expect that they will undergo ST program like this. Therefore, undergoing the rigors of using technology and ICT infrastructures in teaching is way forward challenging [13].

3.2.4. Feedback is not enough

ST program is an avenue to format their knowledge and skills in teaching. As such, feedback form part on the development of every practicing teacher. Informant 17 categorically claimed that he needs the feedback from his CT as he is a beginning teacher while Informants 9, 14, and 16 claimed the necessity of a feedback on their accuracy of their teaching so they would know what to correct. The following transcripts from the informants qualify the claim of this study that one of the factors that affected their experiences in their ST is the feedback from their CTs:

"... feedback is not sufficient; sometimes, they are given late. I do not know if what I am doing is correct or wrong..." S9

"... I wanted real time feedback so I can correct my mistakes especially when I am executing my video lessons so with my lesson plan..." S14

"... the feedback from my CT is not enough. He gives feedback late so I cannot check it immediately..." S16

"... Feedback is necessary for me as a beginner. I need it that much. How I wish that my CT is there with me whenever I do my online class..." S17

Uribe and Vaughan [30] averred on the importance of feedback in getting the best of learning particularly in online learning like the case of the informants and their CTs. Feedbacking in this sense underscores the bridging of the gap between performance and desired goals vis-à-vis learning competencies [31]. Feedback, therefore, is an essential element of improving the dynamic learning process especially the case of the informants of this study as a beginning teacher.

3.2.5. Inattentive and distracted students

Learners play a co-important role in the TLP as much as the teacher. As such, teachers need to tailor strategies on keeping and engaging these learners in the session. However, it can be said that this is a problem even in the normal classroom setting as many students come to school unready, inattentive, and distracted by their problems and intuitions.

In the current study, the informants are burdened with the inattentive and distracted students as they are fully aware that this will not form part in their schooling. The admission of Informant 16 is a manifestation that he failed to establish rapport with his tutee. On the other hand, Informants 14 and 16 admitted that they needed to give some rewards to keep them throughout the session. The following transcripts from the informants qualify the claim of this study that one of the factors that affected their experiences in their ST is the presence of inattentive, distracted students:

"... My problems include my inattentive, distracted students..." S3

"... I needed to adjust to my inattentive tutees..." S4

"... My tutees are distracted with their concentration in the tasks that we do..." S9

"... The readiness and attention of my tutees were my problem. I needed to give rewards (merienda) all the time just to keep them with me in the entire session..." S14

"... They know that they do not have obligations to me. They are inattentive. I cannot strategize so I give rewards after the class like milk tea, sweets..." S16

"... They are inattentive and not ready, as well..." S17

Selvaraj *et al.* [13] averred in their study that students are not attentive and are not comfortable to undergo online education since this is something new in their experiences. On the other hand, other researcher [12] concluded that students need special social care to improve their concentration and motivation in this time of pandemic. It is happened due to especially that all mechanisms are new to all (students, teachers, and parents).

4. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that the informants consider their student teaching as challenging and engaging. They consider their experiences as superficial and half-baked. They also consider face-to-face to be the best modality in doing the program. Hence, they consider their student teaching as hopeless in shaping their potentials as a teacher. On the other hand, poor internet connectivity, lack of gadgets, technological know-

how, feedback, and inattentive, distracted students were found to be the factors that contributed to their experiences in this pandemic education.

The experiences of the informants like their ST program are hopeless in shaping their potentials as teacher post immediate concern among the officials in the university and in the college as students' experiences should be at the continuum. Designing a framework and a tangible program that would allow the pre-service teachers to have a comparable experience with the 'usual' ST program is highly desirable as it revitalize the program in this time of pandemic. In doing so, this will be paramount to an assurance that the college is producing graduates with a breadth outlook in teaching, varied background and experience, and rich understanding of the dynamic and multi-faceted teaching and learning. Apparently, having said that their experiences are challenging and engaging, the college may continue striving to reskill, upskill, and cross-skill its students with the competencies that will make them future-proof teachers.




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