

Experiential learning in teacher education: perceptions, challenges, and opportunities in rural Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions, challenges, and opportunities of experiential learning courses (ELCs) among pre-service and in-service teachers in a rural Philippine context, using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. Findings show that both groups hold positive perceptions of ELCs and recognize their role in linking theory to practice and improving teacher preparedness. Pre-service teachers value ELCs for building confidence, enhancing pedagogical skills, and strengthening relationships with learners. In-service teachers highlight their importance in mentoring and professional development. Challenges for pre-service teachers include difficulties managing diverse learners and balancing time demands, while in-service teachers raised concerns about pre-service readiness, additional workload, and limited institutional support. Opportunities for growth in classroom management, pedagogical knowledge, and collaboration were identified. The findings affirm the continuing importance of ELCs in strengthening teacher education, particularly in rural contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher preparation and continuous professional development are widely recognized as central to educational quality, as they directly influence instructional effectiveness and student learning outcomes [1]. High-quality teachers are characterized not only by strong academic qualifications but also by well-developed pedagogical skills, including the ability to design, implement, and evaluate meaningful learning experiences [2]. Beyond these competencies, teachers' commitment and motivation play a crucial role in shaping effective instruction and fostering positive classroom environments [3].

Professional development serves as a key mechanism for strengthening these competencies. Targeted training, ongoing evaluation, and experiential learning—particularly field-based experiences—enable teachers to adapt to evolving educational demands and increasingly complex classroom contexts [4]. Such approaches also support the integration of sustainability principles into teaching practices, aligning classroom instruction with global priorities and contributing to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals [5]–[7].

Within the Philippine context, teacher quality is a decisive factor in educational outcomes, especially in rural areas where access to resources and institutional support remains limited. Core indicators of teacher quality include educational background, engagement in continuous professional development, and adherence to national standards. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that teachers' academic qualifications and

professional credentials are positively associated with student performance, underscoring the critical role of teacher education institutions in preparing competent, motivated, and responsive educators [6], [8].

Despite the expanding literature on experiential learning in teacher education, most studies focus on program outcomes or on the experiences of pre-service teachers alone, often in urban or well-resourced settings [9]–[11]. As a result, the perspectives of in-service teachers—who serve as mentors and cooperating teachers—remain underexamined. This limitation is particularly evident in rural higher education contexts, where resource constraints, mentoring structures, and institutional coordination can significantly influence the implementation of experiential learning courses (ELCs) [12], [13]. Although national frameworks such as the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST) and Commission on Higher Education (CHED) policies provide guidance for teacher preparation, there is limited empirical evidence on how these policies are experienced and implemented by those directly involved in experiential learning [14], [15]. This study addresses these gaps by offering a context-sensitive examination of ELCs at a Philippine state university, drawing on quantitative and qualitative data to capture nuanced perceptions, challenges, and opportunities among pre-service and in-service teachers. Through a mixed-methods approach, the study explores how ELCs function as a bridge between theory and practice, how mentoring relationships develop, and how institutional conditions shape teacher readiness and professional confidence [16], [17].

Beyond contributing to the literature, the study also offers practical insights for teacher education. The findings may inform curriculum design, mentoring practices, and institutional coordination between higher education institutions and the Department of Education, particularly in rural contexts [14], [15]. Additionally, the study supports the refinement of experiential learning policies to ensure stronger alignment with outcomes-based education, professional standards, and post-pandemic teaching realities that demand flexibility and digital competence [16]. To achieve this, the study is guided by the following specific objectives and research questions: i) what are the perceptions of pre-service and in-service teachers about the role of experiential learning courses in classroom instruction? ii) what challenges and opportunities do pre-service and in-service teachers perceive in the implementation of experiential learning courses in classroom instruction? and iii) what recommendations can be drawn from the perceptions and experiences of pre-service and in-service teachers to improve the implementation of experiential learning courses?

By capturing these views, the research shows the importance of experiential learning in connecting theory with practice. It also provides insights for policymakers and educators to improve the design and implementation of teacher education programs, particularly in rural areas of the Philippines.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, with a quantitative phase to gauge pre-service and in-service teachers' opinions of ELCs and a qualitative phase to thoroughly examine and interpret the results. This method made it possible for the study to record participants' lived experiences as well as quantifiable perceptions, including the opportunities and difficulties involved in putting ELCs into practice [18].

2.2. Participants

There were 178 in-service teachers who acted as resource people and cooperating teachers for experiential learning courses, as well as 201 pre-service teachers enrolled in the teacher education program, participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had direct involvement in experiential learning courses, ensuring that the respondents possessed relevant experiences aligned with the objectives of the study [19]. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with 15 pre-service and 15 in-service teachers, selected for their varying levels of participation and experience in experiential learning courses, to obtain deeper insights. This strategy guaranteed a range of viewpoints, enhancing the qualitative data and offering a thorough comprehension of teachers' experiences and perceptions.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using mixed methods. Two validated questionnaires assessed pre-service (28 items) and in-service teachers' (20 items) perceptions of experiential learning courses. The instruments demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.957 for the pre-service teacher questionnaire and 0.919 for the in-service teacher questionnaire. A four-point Likert scale was used to record the responses. Semi-structured focus groups with chosen participants were used to collect qualitative data, which were accurately recorded on audio and video. While qualitative data were analyzed thematically in accordance with Braun and Clarke [20], using coding, theme identification, and iterative refinement to capture participants' experiences, perceptions, and difficulties in implementing experiential learning courses, quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Perceptions of pre-service teachers on experiential learning courses

Table 1 presents pre-service teachers' perceptions of ELCs. The responses indicate a highly favorable evaluation of these courses, as reflected in the overall mean of 3.62, which falls within the “strongly agree” range. The pattern of responses suggests that participants generally recognize the value of ELCs as a meaningful component of teacher preparation. Across the positive-view indicators, pre-service teachers consistently expressed strong agreement that experiential learning supports their development as future educators. In contrast, responses to the negatively worded statements fall within the “Strongly Disagree” range, with an overall mean of 2.86. This trend indicates that respondents largely rejected statements suggesting that ELCs are discouraging, overwhelming, or ineffective. Taken together, these results demonstrate a clear pattern: pre-service teachers perceive ELCs as beneficial and supportive of their professional preparation while expressing limited agreement with statements that frame such experiences negatively.

Table 1. Perceptions of pre-service teachers on experiential learning courses

Perceptions	N	M	SD	Description
Positive view: experiential learning courses				
Increase my passion for teaching	201	3.58	0.50	Strongly agree
Allow me to assess my skills in a real setting	201	3.66	0.48	Strongly agree
Change my perceptions of classroom management	201	3.48	0.51	Strongly agree
Offer ample opportunities to join extra-curricular activities	201	3.31	0.52	Strongly agree
Are found to be a valuable learning experience about teaching	201	3.69	0.46	Strongly agree
Expose me to unexpected challenges in the classroom	201	3.69	0.49	Strongly agree
Boost my confidence and abilities in the teaching process	201	3.64	0.48	Strongly agree
Encourage analysis and reflection on teaching experiences	201	3.50	0.51	Strongly agree
Help me bridge the gap between theory and practice in teaching	201	3.40	0.52	Strongly agree
Allow me to gain valuable experiences before entering the profession	201	3.68	0.47	Strongly agree
Allow me to observe diverse learning styles and teaching strategies	201	3.70	0.46	Strongly agree
Encourage me to adapt what I learn from observations to real-world teaching scenarios	201	3.72	0.46	Strongly agree
Help me build relationships with learners, teachers, and other school personnel from different backgrounds	201	3.80	0.41	Strongly agree
Expose me to the diversity of learners and cooperating teachers	201	3.64	0.50	Strongly agree
Prepare me to face the realities of teaching diverse learners	201	3.73	0.47	Strongly agree
Equip me with the essentials of the teaching profession	201	3.55	0.52	Strongly agree
Show that classroom management and discipline are essential for effective teaching and learning	201	3.72	0.48	Strongly agree
Overall mean		3.62	0.30	Strongly agree
Negative view: experiential learning courses				
Offer limited opportunities to join extra-curricular activities	201	2.83	0.72	Strongly disagree
Highlight my weaknesses, leading to self-doubt about my skills	201	2.98	0.80	Strongly disagree
Overwhelm me with the sheer amount of information I encounter	201	3.22	0.58	Strongly disagree
Can be frustrating if feedback from supervisors is unclear or unhelpful	201	2.74	0.81	Strongly disagree
Can be emotionally and physically draining when dealing demanding classroom environments	201	2.89	0.69	Strongly disagree
May not sufficiently prepare me for the emotional demands of teaching	201	2.52	0.72	Strongly disagree
Expose me to outdated teaching practices used by cooperating teachers	201	2.83	0.74	Strongly disagree
Can create unrealistic expectations about teacher autonomy in real-world schools	201	2.81	0.74	Strongly disagree
Can be logistically challenging due to difficulties in scheduling classroom observations	201	3.00	0.63	Strongly disagree
Expose me to limited teaching styles in the classrooms where I observe and practice	201	2.84	0.78	Strongly disagree
Can be stressful due to the pressure to perform well in front of learners and accomplish learning tasks	201	2.84	0.77	Strongly disagree
Overall mean		2.86	0.48	Strongly disagree

The overall pattern of responses indicates that ELCs are widely perceived by pre-service teachers as valuable components of teacher education. The strong positive evaluations suggest that these courses meaningfully bridge theoretical learning and practical classroom experience, a key goal of teacher preparation programs. This trend reflects the central role of field-based learning in helping future teachers develop confidence, pedagogical awareness, and familiarity with authentic classroom environments. These findings are consistent with previous research by Poonputta [21], Aguilar and Kang [22], and Voon *et al.* [23], demonstrating that experiential learning strengthens critical thinking, reflective practice, and instructional decision-making among pre-service teachers. Beyond instructional competence, ELCs also contribute to both professional and personal development by fostering self-confidence, adaptability, and openness to new experiences [24]. This aligns with Kolb's experiential learning framework, which emphasizes that learning

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through direct experience deepens the connection between theory and practice, as well as Dewey's view that meaningful learning occurs when reflection is closely tied to action. Despite the positive evaluation, the results also imply that certain aspects of implementation may require further attention. Some responses suggest that logistical factors, classroom realities, and institutional conditions can influence how experiential learning is practiced. These observations highlight the importance of strong mentoring structures, constructive supervisory feedback, and effective coordination between universities and cooperating schools. Prior studies by Choi [25] and Fuentes-Abeledo *et al.* [26], similarly emphasize that supportive mentoring relationships and structured guidance are critical in maximizing the benefits of field-based experiences for teacher candidates. The findings confirm that ELCs are vital for teacher preparation, promoting professional competence and classroom readiness. Addressing logistical and pedagogical challenges can further optimize the benefits of experiential learning and enhance pre-service teachers' preparedness for diverse teaching contexts.

3.2. Perceptions of in-service teachers on experiential learning courses

Table 2 presents the perceptions of in-service teachers regarding ELCs. The results indicate a general positive evaluation, with an overall mean of 3.53, interpreted as "strongly agree". This pattern suggests that in-service teachers generally view ELCs as beneficial to their roles as mentors and cooperating teachers. Across the positively framed indicators, respondents consistently expressed strong agreement that participation in ELCs supports mentoring, professional collaboration, and engagement with pre-service teachers.

Table 2. Perceptions of in-service teachers on experiential learning course

Perceptions	N	M	SD	Description
Positive view: experiential learning courses				
Boost my confidence in guiding pre-service teachers	178	3.65	0.49	Strongly agree
Enhance my ability to provide constructive feedback	178	3.65	0.49	Strongly agree
Equip me with practical skills for mentoring pre-service teachers	178	3.43	0.57	Strongly agree
Are seen as a valuable tool for supporting future generations of teachers	178	3.57	0.57	Strongly agree
Foster collaboration and knowledge-sharing among experienced educators	178	3.62	0.52	Strongly agree
Give me the chance to practice mentoring in a safe and simulated environment	178	3.45	0.59	Strongly agree
Increase in the value of building positive and productive mentoring relationships	178	3.59	0.50	Strongly agree
Allow me to explore different mentoring styles and determine my best approach	178	3.50	0.51	Strongly agree
Feel me better prepared to answer pre-service teachers' classroom-related questions	178	3.38	0.49	Strongly agree
Gain me ideas to be more equipped to handle challenging situations with pre-service teachers	178	3.45	0.51	Strongly agree
Overall mean		3.53	0.39	Strongly agree
Negative view: experiential learning courses				
Require an additional workload without any compensation	178	2.73	0.81	Strongly disagree
Demand that I submit documents needed for their portfolio	178	2.56	0.73	Strongly disagree
Distract my lesson delivery and bring much challenge to me	178	2.19	0.73	Strongly disagree
Disconnect me from the daily grind of my classroom routines	178	2.19	0.75	Strongly disagree
Create pressure to be the best mentor for pre-service teachers	178	2.53	0.82	Strongly disagree
Are costly and do not offer a clear return on investment for schools	178	2.19	0.70	Strongly disagree
Give me problems and disturbances in the teaching-learning process	178	2.10	0.76	Strongly disagree
Are additional burden to mentor another teacher on top of my own workload	178	2.25	0.81	Strongly disagree
Are another responsibility on our already limited professional development time	178	2.69	0.84	Strongly disagree
Add unnecessary stress to my teaching process and fear of being observed and evaluated by pre-service teachers	178	2.31	0.80	Strongly disagree
Overall mean		2.34	0.52	Strongly disagree

In contrast, responses to the negatively worded statements fall within the "strongly disagree" category, with an overall mean of 2.34. This indicates that respondents largely rejected statements suggesting that ELCs create excessive burden, disrupt teaching routines, or negatively affect classroom instruction. The results demonstrate a clear trend in which in-service teachers perceive ELCs as supportive of their mentoring responsibilities and professional practice rather than as sources of difficulty or disruption. These findings are consistent with the earlier study of Wang *et al.* [27] indicating that experiential learning strengthens mentoring practices and supports teachers' professional development. It also increases teachers' confidence as they apply new instructional strategies in authentic teaching contexts, according to McKinney *et al.* [28]. Research has shown that cooperating teachers benefit from these experiences by refining their ability to provide feedback, model effective teaching strategies, and support reflective practice among pre-service teachers. In this sense, ELCs function as reciprocal learning spaces in which both novice and experienced teachers continue to develop professionally.

The results also highlight the collaborative dimension of experiential learning. Previous research by Speicher [29] emphasizes that mentoring relationships and professional dialogue between pre-service and in-service teachers foster knowledge sharing and reflective discussion of classroom practices. Furthermore, the generally low agreement with negatively framed statements suggests that in-service teachers do not perceive mentoring responsibilities associated with experiential learning as a major burden. Instead, the findings indicate that teachers tend to view these responsibilities as manageable and professionally rewarding. This observation aligns with studies such as that of Vogel *et al.* [30], demonstrating that experiential learning initiatives contribute to sustained professional growth and improved teaching practices, which ultimately benefit student learning outcomes. In-service teachers placed particular value on the collaborative and mentoring dimensions of ELCs, noting that these relationships often extend beyond the formal course period and evolve into lasting professional communities. Findings suggest that in-service teachers view ELCs as highly effective mechanisms for professional growth, mentoring, and collaboration. Importantly, the benefits extend beyond individual teachers, as strengthened mentoring practices enhance pre-service teachers' readiness for classroom practice and contribute positively to student learning experiences.

3.3. Challenges and opportunities of experiential learning courses as perceived by pre-service teachers

The experiences of pre-service teachers revealed both obstacles and opportunities for growth that significantly shaped their professional development and readiness for classroom instruction. Five key themes emerged: managing diverse learners, time management, opportunities for improvement, development of classroom management skills, and expansion of pedagogical knowledge.

3.3.1. Theme 1: managing diverse learners

One of the most pressing challenges was coping with learner diversity, both in terms of behavior and levels of comprehension. Pre-service teachers admitted difficulty in responding to varied classroom needs, with one sharing, *"I was challenged regarding the learners' behavior as well as how I could cope with them in the classroom."* Another explained that managing different personalities and attentively listening to students' stories posed unexpected difficulties. These challenges reflect the complexity of teaching in real classrooms and emphasize the importance of preparing teachers for inclusive education.

3.3.2. Theme 2: time management

Another recurring concern was time management. Many pre-service teachers struggled to balance lesson planning, material preparation, and observation tasks. As one participant described, *"I found it difficult to manage my time in answering the learning episodes because there are many things I had to observe."* Another echoed, *"I found difficulty in managing my time in the observation, then focused on the objective for the day in the field study."* Such accounts highlight the demanding workload of ELCs and point to the need for structured support in time allocation and prioritization.

3.3.3. Theme 3: opportunities for improvement

Despite these challenges, pre-service teachers recognized the unique opportunities that ELCs provide. The hands-on exposure enabled them to connect theory with real-life teaching contexts, giving meaning to abstract concepts learned in their coursework. Several participants described the sense of accomplishment that came from being immersed in actual classrooms, which increased their preparedness and motivation to become future teachers. These reflections resonate with the research of Wang and Wang [31] underscoring the transformative role of experiential learning in enhancing teacher readiness.

3.3.4. Theme 4: developing classroom management skills

Experiences in ELCs also prompted pre-service teachers to develop practical classroom management strategies suited to their teaching style. They reported that ELCs offered a foundation for understanding classroom dynamics and experimenting with approaches to discipline, communication, and lesson delivery. This finding echoes earlier studies by Ha *et al.* [32] and Lei [33] asserting that practical training is crucial for building effective methodologies and adaptive teaching practices.

3.3.5. Theme 5: expanding pedagogical knowledge

Finally, ELCs contributed to the expansion of pedagogical knowledge. By engaging with learners of varied backgrounds and needs, pre-service teachers deepened their understanding of instructional strategies and learner-centered approaches. Experiential learning significantly enhances pedagogical competence and equips teachers to navigate the complexities of modern classrooms.

3.4. Challenges and opportunities of experiential learning courses as perceived by in-service teachers

For in-service teachers, integrating ELCs into schools presents both challenges and opportunities. While these teachers play a vital role as mentors, their experiences reveal the practical difficulties of balancing responsibilities, addressing pre-service teachers' readiness, and coping with limited institutional support. Three major themes emerged: time and workload, pre-service teachers' readiness and behaviors, and institutional support and resource constraints.

3.4.1. Theme 1: time and workload

One of the main challenges faced by in-service teachers is the additional workload that comes with supervising pre-service teachers. Beyond teaching their own classes, they must review lesson plans, observe teaching demonstrations, and provide feedback. Several noted that this can consume considerable time and energy, with reports that being observed in the classroom can be "time-consuming and demanding". Such responsibilities, if not managed well, risk reducing the quality of both classroom instruction and mentoring [34]. This highlights the need for balanced schedules and workload adjustments to ensure that mentoring does not compromise regular teaching duties.

3.4.2. Theme 2: pre-service teachers' readiness and behaviors

Another challenge lies in the preparedness of pre-service teachers. Many in-service teachers observed that pre-service teachers often lacked essential skills, such as preparing coherent lesson plans, managing time effectively, or applying diverse teaching strategies. One mentor remarked that the lack of strong lesson-planning skills placed an additional burden on them as cooperating teachers. These gaps in readiness not only slow down the mentoring process but also create frustrations for in-service teachers, who must invest additional time to compensate for these deficiencies [35].

3.4.3. Theme 3: institutional support and resource constraints

In-service teachers also pointed to institutional and logistical limitations as major obstacles to the success of ELCs. Overcrowding in classrooms, lack of resources, and insufficient administrative support made it difficult to create optimal learning conditions. As one participant explained that accommodating 5-7 field study students in one classroom can sometimes "Present logistical challenges that may limit the intended experiential benefits." Such constraints align with previous study by Radović *et al.* [36] highlighting space and resource challenges in implementing experiential learning at scale. Without adequate institutional backing, the potential benefits of ELCs may be diminished.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reinforces the value of ELCs in teacher preparation, highlighting their role in bridging theory and practice while enhancing professional confidence and teaching competence. Pre-service teachers reported improvements in classroom management, instructional strategies, and learner engagement, whereas in-service teachers emphasized gains in mentoring, collaboration, and professional growth. Together, these findings show that ELCs are vital for preparing teachers who are competent, reflective, and ready for real classroom challenges.

The study also identifies contextual challenges that can limit ELC effectiveness, including managing diverse learners, balancing workload, and navigating limited institutional support. In rural universities, stronger collaboration between teacher education programs and partner schools, clearer procedures, adequate resources, and structured mentoring are essential to maximize experiential learning outcomes. Strengthening these supports ensures that both pre-service and in-service teachers can fully benefit from ELCs and translate learning into effective classroom practice.

In practice, the findings suggest that teacher education programs should prioritize structured mentoring systems, guided reflection, and continuous evaluation while fostering closer coordination with the Department of Education. Future research should examine the influence of institutional policies, urban-rural contexts, and teachers' long-term career trajectories on ELC effectiveness. By addressing these areas, experiential learning can be further optimized, producing flexible, resilient, and capable educators ready to meet the evolving demands of 21st-century education.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

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E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

The authors have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study strictly observed ethical standards in educational research. Participation of pre-service and in-service teachers was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the research was conducted in compliance with institutional guidelines and ethical principles of respect, integrity, and responsibility.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Additional data not within the article are available on request from the corresponding author, [MXDPB-F]. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

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