

Exploring the Impact of Blended Learning on Internship: Early Childhood Education Interns' Insights and Experiences

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ABSTRACT: Blended learning has grown in popularity after the pandemic and this age of technological advancement. This study focused on the impact of blended learning during the critical internship phase for early childhood preservice teachers. The descriptive phenomenology method is specifically being used in this qualitative investigation. Creswell's phenomenological analysis procedures were followed in analyzing the data. Themes were then formulated. The experiences of the early childhood education interns with blended learning during their internship unveiled notable learnings and challenges. It helped them realize the necessity for teachers to continuously modify, create, and customize their teaching methods and strategies to continuously improve themselves to better serve their students.

KEYWORDS: impact; blended learning; early childhood education; preservice teachers; Internship

I. INTRODUCTION

The overwhelming experiences of people during the pandemic taught them new skills to navigate the fast-paced, changing world. In the realm of education, the same scenario and reactions are observed. Teachers, in particular, are grappling to continually deliver the instruction. Challenges are quickly remedied to survive the phenomenon. Fortunately, now that we are in the state of recovery from the pandemic, so much has changed, especially in the delivery of the instructions. The landscape of teaching and learning is changed by blended learning's distinctive combination of in-person and online encounters. Aspiring educators find a variety of opportunities and challenges in classrooms that seamlessly combine traditional and online pedagogical approaches, which need careful consideration. This study aims to shed light on the complex effects of blended learning during the crucial internship phase, providing insightful information on how it affects the formation of future educators.

In blended learning, teachers view their roles as facilitators, coaches, guides, and co-learners in the teaching-learning process (Cunningham, 2021). In the study of Singh et al. (2021), it was concluded that in order for the blended learning modality to be effective, capacity building for teachers in the effective use of technologies to facilitate the teaching-learning process should be the priority. In addition, pedagogies to enhance teachers' skills to foster social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence should also be given.

Some studies on blended learning and teaching have posited both positive and challenging effects. Studies like that of Tong et al. (2022) and Chakawodza et al. (2024) found that blended learning positively impacts students' academic achievement. Blended learning increased student interactions with teachers and improved students' academic achievement, self-study abilities, and learning attitudes. Furthermore, more positive effects of blended learning were noted, like improvement of students' performance (Means et al., 2010; Tsai et al., 2011), increased student satisfaction (Martínez-Caro & Campuzano-Bolarín, 2011), and increased student engagement (Baepler et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2012). The flipped nature of the blended learning environment lessens the students' passiveness. Students' critical thinking abilities have been demonstrated to be empowered and enhanced by the hybrid learning modality (Sulistyanto et al., 2023). A well-designed hybrid learning environment can significantly improve students' capacity for creativity and the application of design thinking in digital real-world situations (Lubna et al. 2024). The effectiveness of the educational program has improved after implementing the blended learning modality (Sukirman et al., 2022). Students and teachers have positive outlook towards blended learning (Herwulan, Insih, Cepi, 2023).

Although blended learning and teaching had many positive effects on students' attitudes and learning, there were also challenges that were not to be ignored. In the study of Alsalthi et al. (2021), the success of the blended modality for students is dependent upon the students' proficiency levels. It could be challenging for students with poor grades to implement new teaching and learning techniques in blended learning, particularly if they lack intrinsic motivation. Challenges in infrastructure and students' engagement using blended modes were reported in the study by Hayati et al. (2021). Peñeda et al. (2021) stated that challenges met by students are connectivity issues, management of virtual classrooms, virtual class distractions, a lack of online teaching mastery, and financial problems. In the study of Smith (2015), interns reported satisfaction in the areas of faculty-student

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interaction, course structure, and smooth transition from theory to practice. However, interns reported low satisfaction with the course's academic rigor and sense of community.

Although elementary preservice teachers had positive experiences with blended learning (Yilmaz & Malone, 2020), some opposing findings from research caused this study. In the context of this study, the impact of blended teaching and learning on the lives of student interns in early childhood education is explored. Although there were few studies that focused on preservice teachers and blended learning, there is a lack of studies that focused on early childhood preservice teachers in the Philippines. In order for blended learning to be effectively promoted globally, it is just right to conduct thorough studies in each region to learn more specifically about local issues as well as regionally specialized strategies to facilitate transitions between distinct situations. In this manner, a variety of viewpoints on typical blended learning issues are laid down that can be utilized in a variety of settings (Yilmaz & Malone, 2020). As a result, more effective changes and better educational opportunities will be offered for students everywhere (Spring et al., 2016). Additionally, Yang (2014) proposed that investigating and/or making beliefs clear is crucial for both understanding the teacher experience of blended and online learning as well as ensuring the model's effectiveness.

II. METHODOLOGY

The descriptive phenomenology method is specifically being used in this qualitative investigation. The goal of this phenomenological study approach is to comprehend how different people see a particular phenomenon and its effects (Pathak, 2017). It clarifies the significance and impact of a person's or a group of people's actual experiences related to a well-known phenomenon (Christensen et al., 2010). The focus of the current study is on the impact of blended learning on student internship in early childhood education. These interns were completing their internships using the said modality as an alternative adaptation of the university in the recent educational situation.

The study's participants were found using purposeful sampling. Twelve (12) student interns are completing their early childhood practicum. Classes for young children in this context include students between the ages of 3.5 and 5.5. Interns who volunteered to participate in the study are interviewed. To assist the participants in sharing their stories, the researcher has prepared a set of sample interview questions. The researcher immediately began transcribing the conversations after each participant's interview.

The researcher used Creswell's (2013) phenomenological analysis procedures while analyzing the data. The first is to set aside one's own opinions and biases in order to avoid influencing the analysis process. The start of the written descriptions and the selection of pertinent statements from the participants come next. In the third step, these pertinent subjects are compiled and eventually given context. Fourth, to explain the significance of the experiences, the researcher includes exact citations together with textual descriptions. The researcher next determines the phenomenon's genuine essence and impact after writing the structural descriptions in step five.

Ethical Consideration

The chosen study participants were contacted directly by the researcher. They received an introduction to the current investigation. The consent form is required to be signed by those who have consented to participate as informants. The scheduled interview time and date were then determined. Additionally, the participants were told that they could stop serving as informants at any time. Data are handled with the highest secrecy. In no portion of the paper were the names of the informants mentioned.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using the information and insights provided by the student interns, themes were developed that were centered on their valuable experiences and learning as well as the difficulties they had while pursuing blended learning. For their valuable experiences and learning, the following themes were revealed: **Adapting dynamic teaching strategies; Organizing and managing the classroom; Modifying assessment strategies; Enriching and empowering learning experience.**

A. Adapting dynamic teaching strategies

This theme emphasizes how crucial it is to modify teaching methods and strategies to accommodate learners' needs, make the best use of technology, and sustain interaction and engagement regardless of the delivery method.

The interns shared that in order to be an effective teacher in the blended teaching and learning process, flexibility in planning is a must. This line of realization among interns is supported by Yilmaz & Malone (2020), who reiterated that planning should be done to lessen the resistance from students while generating suitable learning environments, and learning strategies should be developed appropriately. Appropriate teaching strategies has more impact to students' learning (Paulsen & McCormick, 2020). In this manner, the teacher should consider which activities are appropriate for face-to-face and online classes.

P2 For example, in science competency, my plan and design were that for face-to-face teaching, my activities were hands-on experiences, then I had to modify to go online because of some circumstances. So, I have to modify the activities using PowerPoint presentations and change some parts so that they fit the online setup.

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P10 in face-to-face: I have to contemplate the activities based on the assigned lesson. Since it's a physical class, the activities should be engaging and appropriate to the lesson and children. In online classes, I have to be more creative and lively virtually. Since it's a virtual class, all of your lessons and activities are done on your laptop or cellphone.

The interns also considered a learner-centered approach in their planning stage. This is in consonance with Vasileva-Stojanovska (2015), who described blended learning as a student-centered modality. A student-centered and dynamic environment in a blended modality has the ability to boost interaction, cooperation, and reflection among students. Competencies and activities to be delivered should meet the needs of their diverse learners.

P9 During face-to-face delivery, I have to consider the activities I will incorporate into the class that will both be adaptable in a classroom setting and to the students learning styles and needs. At the same time, I have to consider the activities I will adopt to be in line with my objectives that can be done online and that are again in line with my objectives, curriculum, and sustainable developmental goals.

P2 In designing and planning, I have to take into consideration the competencies to be delivered and the kind of learners I have in my class. With that, I think of the changes and expectations towards lesson delivery.

Another point that the interns emphasize in planning is to sustain students' engagement in both face-to-face and online delivery. Interactive teaching with the use of technology and interesting activities will aid the interns in achieving the goal of maintaining student engagement. According to Jung & Latchem (2011), at all levels, students' use of technology increases interaction between educators and students. Communication tools also are important to provide platform for students and teachers to connect and collaborate (Busra, Tansel, & Hakan 2018).

Changes to the teaching and learning process would result in technological literacy. Furthermore, all academic staff need to be technologically competent to facilitate effective blended learning (Azizan et al., 2021).

P1: In teaching face-to-face, I can think of any activities as long as they suit the learners. In online delivery, the change of plan that I have to make is that I need to consider the technology—that the activity that I will give to the students can be successfully done through the technology that I have.

P4: I'll make sure that the activities and the materials are more interesting. During online delivery, it is important that you provide activities that are very innovative and will get attention from the students. You should also make sure to provide visual aids that are appropriate for young learners.

P6-During planning, I make use of more engaging activities appropriate for their level of age. I have to consider this all the time to maintain their interest when I facilitate the lesson.

Teaching young learners requires a lot of energy from the teachers, especially in sustaining their attention. Young children have only a short attention span, which is why student interns are more inclined to plan their activities to engage, capture, and sustain their learners' attention. Furthermore, interns also emphasized the role of effective instructional materials in blended teaching and learning. They have shared their firsthand experiences of how they strive to meet the demands of both physical and virtual learning environments.

P8: There is always the pressure to bring something new to the table and not repeat my instructional materials. Due to the pressure of making the lesson more interactive and entertaining.

P3: For my experiences, the necessary adjustments that I experienced were the PowerPoint presentations, but in the face-to-face class, teachers should use instructional materials that learners may be able to touch and see in reality so that they can manipulate the materials that the teachers presented.

P10: In physical class, materials are more hands-on and visible to the children. It's more exhausting and draining, but it's also more fulfilling if your students learn.

Interns highlighted that crafting instructional materials for young learners requires their innovativeness to cater to the demands of both learning environments. Early childhood interns pointed out the need for manipulatives and realia in teaching face-to-face. They have understood that this is crucial to promoting concept learning at a very young age. Although preparing the manipulatives and other realia is a task, the interns feel fulfilled when they are able to provide one to their students. This means that they clearly understood the way children build and learn concepts. It is also an indication that interns are determined to give quality experiences and eventually learning to their learners. Inkaew (2022) reiterated that teachers need to be aware of the strategies and resources to be used in order to maintain engaging and productive courses with a variety of materials. By linking the materials to students' real-world experiences, teachers can better engage students and stimulate their interest in blended learning (Hayati et al., 2021).

For the interns, adapting dynamic teaching strategies is a remarkable learning experience as they experience blended teaching and learning. This taught them the kinds of activities that are appropriate for online and face-to-face delivery. They must keep in mind that these activities are student-centered in order to keep student engagement as high as possible. Also, considering the young learners' interest, interns are expected to have attractive and interactive instructional materials. According to Kerzic et al. (2019), successful blended learning entails a sophisticated teaching strategy that does not only complement in-person

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instruction but also encourages students to participate in other activities, work on projects, and contribute to the learning process. Furthermore, active learning enhances blended learning (Fazilah et al., 2023).

B. Organizing and managing the classroom

Another highlight of the interns learning during their internship using blended teaching and learning was the management of the classroom, both physical and virtual. This theme stresses the adaptability and efficient engagement tactics that are necessary in both traditional and online learning environments, as well as the dynamic nature of classroom management. For teachers and students, blended learning appears to have offered an in-class face-to-face learning experience that was different from the usual classroom setting in that it was more focused on learning by doing (Yılmaz & Malone, 2020).

The interns narrated that in order to balance control and engagement, they need to understand that teachers have a behavioral responsibility for their learners, whether online or face-to-face. This means that as teachers, they are responsible for managing student behavior and ensuring a pleasant and conducive learning environment.

P6: In online classes, I manage the classroom by setting rules before the class starts, and during lessons, I call students to get their attention and throw questions to see if they are listening. In face-to-face classes, I manage the classroom by giving them rules and consequences. This is to expect good behavior inside and outside the classroom. I give rewards for students who follow rules and give consequences, like taking the rewards back to minimize the misbehavior they have shown.

Additionally, techniques like establishing routines, being consistent with rules and consequences, and utilizing engagement strategies are some of the strategies that interns employ in classroom management. From the narrative of the interns, it can be gleaned from here that they used the behaviorist technique to control and manage behavior in both learning environments.

P4: We will manage them (the students) by establishing rules and routines.

P12: I make sure that my classroom management is still intact by using callbacks and making sure that all students can participate.

One distinguished feature that interns noticed as advantageous on the part of the teacher is parental involvement in the virtual learning environment. The presence of parents or guardians during online delivery served as additional support for managing behavior and learning among students. Parents are obliged to call attention and guide their children in activities on an online platform. This scene gives additional and immediate support to the teachers while delivering the teaching and learning process. Family participation is essential for online learning to succeed. An adult at home must frequently assume this extra duty in order for kids to connect with their teachers and remain interested in the lessons. Parents frequently had to fill the roles of teacher aides and teachers during the crisis. (Plotka & Guirguis, 2023) Early childhood education places a strong emphasis on communication, support, and partnership with families. Indeed, meeting the needs of students was made possible by a collaborative culture and an effort on the part of parents and teachers to create a student-centered learning environment. (Borup et al., 2014)

P7: For online, the teacher would likely give a reminder of the rules, which the students would really follow because their parents are by their side.

P12: It is easier in an online class in terms of classroom management because there are parents beside them.

Although it is said that one of the biggest challenges facing preservice teachers is disciplining students in face-to-face instruction (Vonderwell & Turner, 2005), interns manage their learners through providing engaging and interesting activities, being behaviorists, and with the help of their parents.

C. Modifying Assessment Strategies

Modification and accommodation in the assessment of learning are two of the distinctive learning of interns after immersing themselves in blended learning. This theme expresses the need to adapt and modify assessment strategies to be functional. Diverse assessment techniques must be included to take note of all aspects of learning.

Interns narrated that there is a need for on-going modifications to assessments to fit each learning environment. Assessments given in person or face-to-face may have other considerations compared to those given online.

P2: In blended teaching delivery, the assessment would undergo a lot of modifications, especially if I couldn't see improvements or whether it was effective for my learners. When it's not really working, that assessment should be cut and changed to a more appropriate one.

Verbal responses are commonly used by interns in online assessments due to the limited skills of the young learners. Most of the young learners are not readers yet. So, they cannot yet read directions or instructions. Written works are most likely done or given in face-to-face modality.

P5: In the assessment during online classes, the students answer it mostly verbally, but in face-to-face classes, I let my students do written work.

P6: In my assessment, I use pictures for visuals, fewer words for students who are beginner readers, and symbols like check or wrong or shapes in answering.

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Most of the young learners needed to be individualized during an assessment to get the whole picture of the child's learning. This will not be achieved when the assessment is done online. That is why, if an assessment is given online, most of the time the learners respond orally. Aside from modifications in techniques, interns narrated that assessment should always be aligned with the learning objectives they have set.

P7: It has to be within the scope of the lesson objectives, and the objectives should be in line with your students' capabilities.

Interns also posited that assessment of some competencies is best suited to a particular delivery. Thus, interns need to make a sound decision when it comes to assessment. For example, coloring and drawing skills are best given and observed in a face-to-face environment.

P8: In terms of making the assessments, there are some changes to be made according to modality. There are times when a particular modality limits the ability of the teachers to best capture the competency, like coloring. For me, it is best to be given face-to-face.

Interns emphasize the significance of flexible assessment procedures that are suited to the specific features of various learning contexts and are in line with the learning objectives. They emphasize the need for constant assessment modification and the use of a variety of assessment methods to successfully support student learning. In order to evaluate student comprehension, modify the course, and customize the work in response to the findings of the formative assessment, it is necessary to employ product submissions and online discussions. Teachers can provide students with targeted feedback while they are still learning by using formative evaluations. Formative assessments are therefore advantageous to students since they provide feedback that they may utilize to enhance and modify their work (Cunningham, 2021).

D. Enriching and Empowering Learning Experience

This theme encapsulates the other soft skills and values learned by the interns in blended learning. The interns expressed that aside from the basic skills development of becoming a teacher, they recognized learning the necessary 21st century skills that will equip them to thrive in the future of education.

P11: Great experience, where I have ideas of what our future education will be. In the next generation, it does help me to be prepared for a teaching career in the near future.

P2: I am thankful and satisfied with my experiences in blended teaching and learning delivery. Having both set up in my internship journey made me equipped and ready, especially in 21st century teaching, learning, and sustainability.

P1: We are already in the 21st century; I think that it is important to learn such a modality. It is important for a 21st century teacher to learn how to handle a class both face-to-face and online because, aside from the uncertainties of time wherein a lot of schools have opted for blended learning, we can't deny the fact that this is the age when technology arises. We cannot just leave the school as a physical institution; we need to adapt to what is happening around us, and that is the online world. This modality allows the teachers to be equipped and continue to learn both in a face-to-face and online setting.

Their rich learning experience in blended learning also made them realize the value of gratitude. The interns are remarkably thankful that they have immersed themselves in blended teaching and learning. For them, it is like hitting two birds with one stone when they both experience face-to-face and online teaching and learning. They have experienced and learned the processes and intricacies of the two teaching and learning modes.

P10: The blended teaching and learning experience is one of the significant moments because I was able to experience both worlds.

P4: It was really a blissful experience, and I am very grateful for it. It might be hard, but later on, I was able to adjust and learn a lot of things.

P6: It was challenging and fun. I am grateful that I was exposed to blended teaching because of how evolving our world is right now.

Adaptability and flexibility are the two most remarkable soft skills learned by the interns. Being adaptable and flexible are considered strong skills for teachers in this new and evolving educational landscape. Students' adaptability is a result of strong self-regulation and self-efficacy. In the end, students who can self-regulate their learning process have a better understanding of their activities, are able to monitor their progress, and can evaluate the effectiveness of their learning practices. (Awee et al., 2022).

P8: I consider it an edge for me because it creates skills of versatility and is more rounded to the demands of the modern world.

P6: I think new teachers need this kind of training because, as teachers, we always need to be flexible.

The interns felt satisfaction and fulfillment after they successfully navigated the new methods of teaching, specifically blended learning. This is in addition to the positive impact of blended learning on preservice teachers, as stipulated in the study of Yılmaz & Malone (2020). It is stated in their study that preservice teachers have increased their self-efficacy as future teachers.

P9: It is fulfilling and full of learning. Every day is a whole new experience that challenges me as a future teacher because it gives me a glimpse of reality. It trained me on the ways of blended teaching delivery.

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Indeed, the experiences of the interns in their internship using blended teaching and learning are extremely noteworthy. Thus, this created a great impact on them as future educators and the future of education. Interns manage to get past all of the challenges they encounter when carrying out their instructional duties in light of the dearth of online instruction experience (Asrifan, 2020). During this time, they are also capable of being creative and professional.

E. Challenging Path of Blended Learning

On the other hand, along with the noteworthy learning of the interns, some challenges in the implementation of blended learning were also spotted. Interns narrated the problems of access and equity. The issue of internet connectivity is the number one factor that can impede the implementation of blended learning. Not all of the interns and also the students have very good connectivity and equipment needed for blended learning.

P7: There are times when my connectivity is not stable. In this case, my online classes are affected. My videos will not stream continuously.

P9: When I got disconnected every now and then during live class, it was frustrating for me and my learners. When my games took time to load, the learners lost their patience.

As stated in the study (Agung et al., 2020; Peñeda et al., 2021), restricted internet connections impact teacher interns' effectiveness in online instruction. The issue of connectivity compromised the timely implementation of the online teaching and learning process (Alejandro et al., 2023).

Disruptions in the home setting are also factors for inattentiveness and passiveness.

P2: In an online class, there are more distractions, and you can't see if your learners are still engaged with the activities. Getting young learners to be engaged in their tasks is one of the challenges for preschool teachers due to their short attention span. According to Alzahrani et al. (2023), the teaching styles of the teachers greatly affect learners' engagement in both face-to-face and online modalities.

Young learners also needed the guidance and supervision of adults during online classes due to their lack of capability in navigating and controlling their applications on their hardware, which some family setups are not capable of providing. When two parents are working and nobody is left to guide the young child in his online learning, this scene poses a challenge on the part of young learners engaging in blended learning.

P6: It is a challenge when a nursery learner has a technical problem and no adult is beside him; for example, the microphone is not working. No matter how I gave instructions on how to fix it, the child really cannot follow. And for the entire session, he did not participate in the activities.

Monitoring young learners' progress is a challenge in an online modality; hence, it is best to track their progress in a face-to-face modality.

P6: We can't always track if they're still listening and if their answers really came from them or their guardians. Their inability to watch the children's entire range of activities as a lesson developed was one of their main problems (Jin, 2023). Observing students' advancement via the educational platform enables them to view students' results in a particular topic so that teachers are able to provide a specific intervention. (Peñeda et al., 2021) Thus, interns opt to monitor students' progress during the face-to-face modality when they can entirely observe the learners.

The lack of connectivity for some learners, disruptions in the home settings, a lack of guidance and supervision for some learners due to family dynamics, and lastly, monitoring progress on an online platform are some of the challenges that the interns noticed as they navigated their internships in blended learning. Some of these challenges are also noted in other countries. As stated in the study by Hayati et al. (2021), teachers have several challenges in blended learning; these include a lack of internet connection, managing the students, a lack of attention, a lack of discipline, and the difficulty of assessing students' tasks.

IV. CONCLUSION

The experiences of the Early Childhood Education interns with blended learning during their internship unveiled notable learnings. Specifically, interns gained knowledge and skills on the following: adapting dynamic teaching strategies; organizing and managing classrooms; modifying assessment strategies; and enriching and empowering the learning experience. However, along with these positive outcomes, there were also some challenges, like a lack of connectivity for some learners, disruptions in home settings, a lack of guidance and supervision for some learners due to family dynamics, and lastly, monitoring the progress of students on an online platform.

The perspectives offered by student interns emphasized the impact of blended learning on their quest to become effective teachers. It helped them realize the necessity for teachers to continuously modify, create, and customize their teaching methods and strategies. Teachers should develop engaging and interesting learning experiences that support student engagement to successfully manage physical and virtual classrooms. Assessment should be reflective of diverse learners' needs and capabilities. Also, teaching requires the soft skills of teachers to fully understand their roles and responsibilities in society. Lastly, to find ways to

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minimize the challenges and utilize the opportunities for blended learning to be an effective modality to use at this time of technological advantage.

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