

# Lived Experiences of Pre-Service Teachers During Early Childhood Internship

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Publication Date: 2026/05/19

**Abstract:** Teaching internship is an important part of teacher training that allows pre-service teachers to integrate the theoretical aspects of teaching with real-world experiences. An internship provides future teachers with hands-on experience, improves their teaching techniques, and equips them with the professional skills necessary for successful teaching. In this study, the lived experiences of pre-service teachers in their early childhood internship at Central Mindanao University were explored during the Academic Year 2025 – 2026. It was designed to describe their internship experiences, identify their struggles and challenges with these experiences, and learn how these experiences assisted in their preparation for the teaching profession. A phenomenological approach using a qualitative research design was used to study participants' experiences of living. The study's subjects were six pre-service teachers of early childhood education, purposively selected. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data, and thematic analysis was used to make sense of participants' responses and identify patterns, themes, and meanings. The results showed that the pre-service teachers had both positive and negative experiences in their internship. Positive experiences included increased confidence as a teacher, increased classroom management skills, meaningful engagement with learners, and personal development. But challenges were also experienced regarding differences in learner needs, lesson preparation, workload, time management, and emotional stress. Despite these difficulties, interns considered their internships valuable learning experiences that enhanced their adaptability, resilience, and preparedness for the future teaching profession. The research findings indicated that early childhood internships play a significant role in the professional development and preparation of pre-service teachers, particularly through teaching exposure, reflective practice, and mentorship. These experiences gave them confidence and commitment in facing classroom realities.

**Keywords:** *Internship, Pre-Service, Preparedness, Pedagogy, Phenomenology.*

**How to Cite:** Frecie P. Dizon; Jenny Ann D. Borres; Ruby C. Arenilla; John Marthine Anthony B. Salarda; Nawenzie Naziah P. Mateo; Gladys S. Escarlos (2026) Lived Experiences of Pre-Service Teachers During Early Childhood Internship. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 11(5), 467-474. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26may595>

## I. INTRODUCTION

Internship experiences are an important link between what students learn in a teacher preparation program and their experiences in the classroom. Internships are a key component of early childhood education programs for preservice students that allow them to put their pedagogical knowledge into practice and help them gain a deeper understanding of the realities of working with young children and develop their professional identity. The experiences are especially important because early childhood classrooms demand that teachers respond and nurture children's developmental, emotional, social, and cognitive needs. In recent years, clinical and field-based experiences have been highlighted as playing a significant role in developing preservice teachers' teaching competence, reflective practice, and professional development (Flores & Swennen, 2020; Yuan et al., 2022). Case studies of real classrooms inform

preservice teachers about the challenges of teaching in authentic classrooms and help them bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Teachers' education institutions in the Philippines are required to offer experiential learning opportunities to prepare future teachers for practice. Practicum and internship opportunities to develop competent, reflective teachers are also noted as important by the Commission on Higher Education (2017). It is also found that internships can boost preservice teachers' self-confidence, adaptability, self-regulation in classroom management, and pedagogical flexibility (Liu, 2021; OECD, 2020). Internship experiences are seen as meaningful processes in which knowledge is acquired as a result of active involvement, reflection, and transformation of experiences, based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984). Similarly, sociocultural models of learning have emphasized mentoring, collaboration, and

guided participation in professional learning (Vygotsky 1978). The frameworks suggest that internships are more than merely a program of study that must be completed as part of the graduation process; they are experiences for personal and professional development.

Internships are known to be beneficial, but preservice teachers still face several academic, emotional, and professional issues during their field immersion. Research carried out in the past five years demonstrates that preservice teachers often report stress on a number of aspects of classroom management, lesson preparation, adjustments to teaching methods, and meeting the needs of a diverse student population (Kim & Roth, 2021; König et al., 2022). Early childhood settings can be more challenging as teachers are required to engage children in learning whilst controlling their behavior and offering emotional support. These experiences have a significant impact on how preservice teachers view their competencies, resiliency, and preparedness to teach. Furthermore, the shift from student to teacher can be a transformative experience that may influence their conception of the nature of their work and identity as teachers.

The study examines the internship experiences of the first batch of Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECE) students at the Central Mindanao University (CMU) in the Academic Year (AY) 2025–2026. Their experiences as the inaugural group completing the internship program offer much insight into what early childhood field immersion experience is like in local and institutional settings. The study aims at finding out the description of pre-service teachers' experiences in the classroom, the difficulties they face, and the significance they give to their professional training experiences through internship, using a qualitative phenomenological approach. Specifically, this study is designed to: (a) describe the experience of the preservice teachers in the early childhood internship experience; (b) explore challenges in the internship process; and (c) understand how the preservice teachers make meaning of their early childhood field experiences in relation to their professional growth and preparation for teaching. This study can be a valuable tool in helping to enhance teacher preparation courses by gaining a deeper understanding of the lives of preservice teachers. Findings could be useful to preservice teachers preparing for field immersion, teacher educators and mentor teachers in designing and refining their supervision and support practices, and to school administrators to inform internship policies, and to future researchers to inform the growing body of knowledge on teacher preparation and experiential learning in early childhood education.

## II. RELATED LITERATURE

### ➤ *Challenges Faced by Pre-Service Teachers During Internship*

Early childhood education preservice teachers (PSTs) face several challenges during internships as they move from classroom theory to classroom practice. This is often because of the contrasting nature of classroom teaching - the

controlled environment of the university classroom compared to the rapidly changing and unpredictable environment of the early childhood classroom. When PSTs start teaching children, they need to plan and implement lessons, manage their behavior, and respond to unanticipated events, which can lead to stress and challenges as they transition into a professional teaching position.

Preparation for an internship can affect PSTs' readiness to fulfill their responsibilities, as preservice teachers who are not ready for the demands of the practicum, such as classroom management, lesson preparation, and behavior management, may struggle to complete the numerous tasks they are expected to complete (Guiab, 2021).

Similarly, Zhu et al. (2020) note that preservice teachers face professional difficulties during their practicum, especially regarding relationships and expectations within the school system. These include professional interactions with mentors, adapting to classroom practices, juggling multiple responsibilities, and understanding PSTs' roles in the school. These challenges may affect their self-confidence and teaching performance as early-career teachers.

A further challenge for PSTs relates to classroom management and getting children's attention. Moussaid and Zerhouni (2020) describe how many preservice teachers find it challenging to manage classroom discipline and keep students focused. Children in early childhood classrooms exhibit varying behaviors and developmental needs, which require effective classroom management strategies. If inexperienced, PSTs might find it challenging to create a focused learning environment.

Further, Calamlam (2020) suggests a gap between theoretical learning in teacher education and real classroom experiences. While PSTs learn about teaching strategies in university, they may need to adapt to the classroom environment and respond to problems creatively. The disconnect between theory and practice requires PSTs to adapt their teaching strategies quickly to meet learners' needs.

### ➤ *Professional Development and Identity Formation*

Early childhood education internships are also an important component of preservice teachers' professional development and identity. As PSTs teach, reflect, and interact with mentors and students, they develop their teaching confidence and identify themselves as teachers.

Liwanag (2023) considers the internship as a pivotal moment for preservice teachers to develop their professional identity. Through ongoing teaching practice, PSTs develop their teaching skills, build confidence in managing their learners, and broaden their understanding of teachers' roles in the early years of learning. This enables them to shift their role from student teachers to teachers.

Similarly, Aldabbus (2020) highlights the role of reflection in an internship. Reflection enables preservice teachers to evaluate their teaching, recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and plan how to improve. Reflection helps PSTs develop confidence, accountability, and professionalism, which, in turn, fosters their commitment to professionalism as teachers.

Yuan et al. (2022) also explain that identity formation in teaching is a gradual process that occurs through engagement with mentors and classroom teaching. Under the supervision of mentors, preservice teachers learn effective teaching approaches, classroom management, and professionalism. This enables them to move from being learners to practitioners in the field.

Moreover, Hidayati (2021) suggests that mentoring is important for preservice teachers' professional learning. Positive mentoring provides feedback, encouragement, and advice to enhance PSTs' teaching and confidence. Preservice teachers' views on their roles as teachers can be shaped by positive mentoring relationships.

Li et al.'s (2025) recent research also demonstrates that active participation in internship activities helps to build a professional identity. Through teaching, reflection, and collaboration, preservice teachers build resilience and flexibility. This helps them view challenges as learning opportunities and helps them build resilience as teachers.

#### ➤ *Preparation Through Field Studies and Theory–Practice Link*

Pre-internship and field studies in teacher education are critical because they provide opportunities to apply the theoretical knowledge acquired during studies and prepare PSTs for the teaching journey. These "placement" activities give preservice teachers a chance to observe classrooms, put educational theories into practice, and build their skills in preparation for their internships.

Guiab (2021) states that PSTs are given learning opportunities during the pre-internship program to help them prepare for the tasks they will face in their teaching practice. Observations, practice teaching, and simulation activities enable students to experience various classroom procedures, student interactions, and teaching practices.

Similarly, Linda Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) argue for more experiential learning opportunities in teacher education so that preservice teachers can connect the theoretical knowledge they acquire in their university subjects to classroom practice to understand teaching and learning better.

Cabanlit (2019) also emphasizes the need for holistic teacher education programs that equip students to teach in the classroom. By engaging with case studies, classroom simulations, and demonstrations, preservice teachers learn how to respond to classroom challenges and meet student needs.

Also, ongoing reflection on field experiences supports the integration of theory and practice, helping preservice teachers reflect on their teaching experiences, make changes to their teaching strategies and practices, and bridge the gap between theory and practice (Liu, 2021).

Hudson et al. (2020) report that field studies in diverse classrooms are preparation for internships. The diversity of teaching and student demographics helps PSTs become flexible teachers and classroom managers, well-equipped to deal with the complex teaching and learning environment in early childhood classrooms.

#### ➤ *Conceptual Framework*

The study uses an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore preservice teachers' interpretations of their early childhood education internship. Guided by the research questions, the framework focuses on describing preservice teachers' experiences in real classroom contexts during their internship. These sources of knowledge enable the researcher to understand how participants understand, interpret, and make sense of their roles, relationships, and tasks in early childhood settings. The framework involves more than just recording what is happening; it also involves discerning the meanings of these experiences in relation to the participants' development and preparation for becoming teachers.

This methodology aims to collect descriptive data through interviews, where participants are asked to describe their experiences, challenges, and reflections. Particular attention is given to the challenges they face and their impact on their perceptions and reactions. The researcher conducts interpretive analysis to determine themes that demonstrate how preservice teachers interpret their teaching experiences in relation to their teacher preparation. This reflective analysis helps develop a comprehensive understanding of their internship experiences, provides insights for the preparation of early childhood educators, and improves teacher education.

#### ➤ *Theoretical Framework*

According to David A. Kolb, Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) suggests that learning occurs as both a process and a product of experiences. Knowledge is made when people experience real-life situations and reflect on them," Kolb argues. The theory is based on the four steps of learning: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. This cycle will enable students to gain knowledge from their experience and then inform them of their actions.

This theory underpins the study, "Understanding the Lived Experiences of Preservice Teachers During Early Childhood Internship," as preservice teachers learn from their classroom teaching experiences. They develop teaching experiences that enable them to reflect on their instruction through their interactions with young learners, lesson planning, and classroom management. As they reflect on and apply their learning, preservice teachers learn how to teach,

gain teaching competence, and deepen their understanding of early childhood teaching and learning.

According to Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning, learning results from social interaction and communication; therefore, social environments play an important role in learning. The difference between what a learner can do alone and what he or she can accomplish with the support and guidance of someone more able is called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The teachers' mentoring and scaffolding help learners learn, acquire new skills, and increase their confidence.

This theory justifies the study by showing that preservice teachers learn to teach through interactions with cooperating teachers, supervisors, and students during their internship. With support, feedback, and modeling of their practice, they refine their teaching and management strategies. These interactions support preservice teachers in developing confidence, professional knowledge, and an identity as early childhood educators.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in type with a phenomenological approach to examine preservice teachers' life experiences in their internship at Central Mindanao University in early childhood education. It was suitable because phenomenology is concerned with the interpretation and description of the common experiences of individuals who have experienced a given phenomenon. The focus of this study was the internship experiences of preservice teachers, including classroom experiences, the challenges they faced, and the professional development they gained from immersing themselves in the field. The subjects were six (6) fourth-year Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECEd) preservice teachers of the pioneer batch for the Academic Year 2025-2026. They were chosen using purposive sampling as they had previously served internships in early childhood settings in partner schools in the Dologon area. The inclusion criteria were: fourth-year students of

BECEd who were enrolled, completed, or were undergoing an internship, and were interested in sharing their experience with the study.

The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to collect data, which aimed to understand their experiences, challenges, and learning from the field studies and internship. The interview guide was expert-validated by an expert lecturer from the College of Education to ensure clarity, relevance, and credibility of the questions. The data collection process included permission and informed consent from the participants prior to face-to-face interviews. The interviews centered on significant learning experiences in the classroom, struggles faced in the internships, and the impact of field studies on their readiness for teaching. Additional questions were asked of the participants to get more details from them. Interviews were undertaken with the participants, and audio recorded and transcribed word-for-word with their consent for accurate documentation and analysis.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected. The transcribed interview texts were thoroughly analyzed and read by the researchers to become familiar with the stories told by the participants. Relevant findings for the research questions were detected and were organized into meaning units and subsequently classified on the basis of similar ideas and experiences. These were later distilled into themes reflective of the participant experiences and challenges, and their professional learning while on internship. All ethical standards were followed throughout the study, such as voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, using pseudonyms, and confidentiality. Interviews were recorded, and the transcriptions were kept securely and only accessed for academic purposes. Member checking was done to ensure trustworthiness and credibility, that is, to enable the participants to check the accuracy of their respective responses and the researchers' interpretations. This study was conducted to gain insight into pre-service teachers' internship experiences and to assist in the enhancement of internship programs and teacher education.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### ➤ Experiences of Pre-Service Teachers in Early Childhood Internship

Table 1 Meaningful Experiences Encountered While Teaching Young Learners

Theme	Sub-themes	Response / Statement
Meaningful Emotional Experiences in Teaching Young Learners	Fulfilment in Learners' Progress	"Building positive relationships with the learners and seeing their progress..."  "I felt a great sense of happiness watching my students improve their skills..."
	Happiness Through Learners' Participation and Excitement	"I encountered was seeing my learners understand the lessons, actively participate in activities, and express their happiness..."  "It was rewarding to see them become happy and excited when they learned something new..."

	Realization of Learners’ Need for Encouragement and Care	“I encountered while teaching young learners was realizing how much they value affirmation and encouragement...”  “Children need love, understanding, and encouragement...”
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Table 1 shows the emotional events that PSTs experienced during the internship that were meaningful to them in relation to teaching young learners. The findings showed that PSTs found emotional fulfilment in seeing learners' growth, children's participation and excitement in their activities, and in recognizing the value of encouragement and care in ECE learning. The PSTs reported happiness when learners' performance improved, when learners actively engaged in class activities, and when learners positively reacted to affirmation and support from their teachers.

The PSTs' experiences demonstrated that emotional fulfilment emerged through direct interaction with young learners in real classroom contexts. When one PST saw his students' improvement in the skills they had learned, he was very happy and stated that they felt they had something to offer as good teachers in the future. One PST responded that the motivation for teaching came from seeing children happy and excited about their learning; this was rewarding. Children's engagement and enthusiasm increased their motivation to teach. The need for emotional support in teaching the young learner was also cited as being important, as in the PSTs' statement, "Children need love, understanding, and encouragement. The PSTs' responses indicated that the internship had a positive impact on them and had opened their eyes to the emotional and relational aspects of teaching in early childhood education.

The PSTs felt their internship experiences were valuable and helped them develop their knowledge of

teaching children. One PST said that they felt their pupils had progressed with their skills so much that it was therapeutic and motivating for her. One PST reported, "It was rewarding to see them happy and excited when they learned something new; their participation and enthusiasm improved the teaching experience. The PSTs also found that emotional support in early childhood education was a needed factor: "Children need love, understanding, and encouragement," said one of the PSTs. The experiences helped the PSTs appreciate that teaching young children is more than just teaching; it is also caring, encouraging, and building positive relationships with children that help them grow and develop.

According to Liwanag (2023), the purpose of internship experiences is to help develop the preservice teachers' confidence and professional identity in which they can be involved in meaningful activities in the real classroom, where they can use their theory knowledge, encounter with real classroom challenges, and are gradually exposed to instructional tasks, classroom management and interaction with learners while developing their self-confidence in the teaching profession. This notion is also supported by the study of Yuan et al. (2022) that argued that such continuous interactions with learners and practical experiences in teaching are key in the gradual construction of teacher identity through which preservice teachers become more competent, sensitive, and adaptive to the needs of different learners, allowing them to engage in reflective practice and internalize the roles, responsibilities, and values of teaching.

➤ *Experiences of Pre-Service Teachers in Early Childhood Internship*

Table 2 Challenges Encountered by Pre-Service Teachers During Internship Placement

Theme	Sub-themes	Response / Statement
Challenges in Managing Learners and Internship Demands	Adapting to Diverse Learning Needs	“Students had different learning paces, which required me to adjust my teaching strategies...”  “Managing different behaviors and learning styles of young learners...”  “Difficult to keep their attention during lessons...”
	Managing Learners’ Behaviors and Attention	“Managing high energy during group activities...”  “Young learners naturally have short attention spans and high energy levels...”
	Coping with Physical, Mental, and Emotional Exhaustion	“Overwhelming workload was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting...”

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Table 2 shows the problems encountered by the PSTs in their internship placement. Participants remarked that transitioning from theory to practice is challenging for interns and PSTs, who must navigate the uncertainty of young learners' behavior in the classroom. They described how they dealt with children with varying learning needs, behavior, and attention spans, as well as their teaching responsibilities and classroom expectations. The PSTs also noted that they were tired from their constant lesson preparation, classroom management, and their emotional involvement in teaching young learners.

One PST shared that "Students had different learning paces, which required me to adjust my teaching strategies," and that it took effort to address the varying learning needs of young learners in the classroom. Another PST said it was "Difficult to keep their attention during lessons," indicating the challenge of maintaining learners' attention and engagement. Likewise, one PST stated that the

"Overwhelming workload was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting," noting that internship responsibilities were not limited to teaching responsibilities, but also included many other aspects that affected interns' overall health and wellness. These stories show how an internship transformed into a personal experience of the challenges and complexities of real classroom practice.

PSTs were required to tailor the way they teach to the varying learning styles of young children in the classroom, as evidenced in one PST's response, "Students learnt at different speeds and I needed to adapt my teaching style to them. Other PSTs said, "Difficult to keep their attention during lessons," which means it is challenging to maintain pupils' attention and involve them in lessons. Similarly, one PST highlighted the physically, mentally, and emotionally draining nature of the "Overwhelming workload," which had a detrimental effect on interns' overall health and well-being. The following stories depict a little of what internships were like and how they demonstrated the complexities and pressures of the real classroom.

The results corroborate those of Moussaid and Zerhouni (2020), who argued that PSTs could find difficulties in classroom management and maintaining the attention of the children in the early childhood classroom due to the diversity of the behaviors and the developmental needs they might encounter in the early childhood classroom, and the need for continuous adjustment by the teacher. Likewise, Guiab (2021) noted that internships can be stressful for PSTs because they must prepare lessons, manage the classroom, and participate in actual teaching. Moreover, Zhu et al. (2020) noted that practicum experiences can cause emotional and professional stress for PSTs, thereby affecting their perceptions and adaptation to the realities of teaching.

Table 3 Meaning-Making of Field Experiences in Relation to Professional Preparation

Theme	Sub-themes	Response / Statement
Integration of Theory and Practice in Professional Preparation	Application of Educational Theories in Real Classroom Situations	"Apply educational theories in real-life teaching situations..."  "Connect child development and classroom management theories to actual teaching..."
	Development of Teaching Competence and Confidence	"Felt more confident during my internship..."  "Understood teaching strategies, classroom management, and child development..."
	Experiential Learning Through Observation and Practice	"Learned classroom management and lesson planning through observations and practice teaching..."  "Observing experienced teachers helped me implement effective teaching strategies..."

Table 3 presents the meaning-making of field experiences in relation to the professional preparation of preservice teachers (PSTs). The findings revealed the major theme, Integration of Theory and Practice in Professional Preparation, with the sub-themes: Application of Educational

Theories in Real Classroom Situations, Development of Teaching Competence and Confidence, and Experiential Learning Through Observation and Practice. The PSTs described their field studies and internship experiences as meaningful opportunities that enabled them to connect

classroom theories with actual teaching practice, build confidence in working with learners, and develop practical teaching skills through observation and experience.

The findings indicate that field experiences became an important avenue for PSTs to understand how teaching theories are applied in real classroom settings. Through observation and practice teaching, the PSTs learned how to manage classrooms, prepare lessons, and respond to learners' diverse needs. Their experiences also suggest that exposure to actual classroom situations helped reduce feelings of anxiety and increased their confidence as future teachers. The PSTs further recognized that learning from experienced teachers and mentors strengthened their teaching strategies and professional readiness. These experiences demonstrate that professional preparation is strengthened when PSTs are exposed to authentic classroom interactions and experiential learning opportunities.

The participants' experiences indicate that the challenges faced during the internship were meaningful learning opportunities for PSTs to grow and become more aware of themselves. One PST reported challenges in 'Managing different behaviors and learning styles of young learners' as they realized that teaching is a process that demands patience, adaptability, and sensitivity toward individual differences in children. The feelings of tiredness also reflect the emotional and working expectations that PSTs did not have about teaching before. As a result of these experiences, the PSTs gained a greater understanding of the reality of teaching. They began taking responsibility for their profession and building resilience as future teachers.

The findings corroborate the research by Moussaid and Zerhouni (2020) in this context and conclude that classroom management and keeping students focused on the learning materials are challenges faced by PSTs in early childhood classes, as they involve multiple behaviors and developmental needs that require the teacher to make adjustments at all times. Likewise, Guiab (2021) noted that the internship experience may be stressful for PSTs due to lesson preparation, classroom demands, and the experience of facing real classroom situations. Zhu et al. (2020) also noted that practicum experiences can pose emotional and professional stressors for PSTs, shaping their perceptions and their adjustments to the realities of the teaching profession.

## V. CONCLUSION

The preschool teachers' experience in their undergraduate program was described as meaningful and fulfilling, especially with young children. These experiences enabled them to see that teaching was not just an instructional role but also a nurturing role and reinforced their developing teacher identity. While the positive experiences were common, the participants still faced challenges in classroom management, meeting the needs of their learners, and dealing with the emotional, physical, and mental rigors of the internship. These difficulties enabled them to gain insight into the facts and difficulties of teaching. In addition, the participants considered their field experience

as an integral link between theory and practice, allowing them to build self-confidence, competence, and readiness to work in their future profession through direct work, observation, and mentorship.

## RECOMMENDATION

Teacher education institutions should further improve internship programs, give more chances to interns to reflect and receive guidance and emotional support to help them cope with the experiences and continue to build their professional identity. Cooperating teachers and internship supervisors should also give preservice teachers consistent mentorship, feedback, and direction to solve problems in the classroom and to deal with learner diversity effectively. Finally, field study and practicum courses need to include greater amounts of hands-on and classroom-based experiences, including simulations, guided observations, and behavior management experiences, to equip preservice teachers with the desired experiences necessary for the real-life challenges of early childhood internship experiences.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researchers would like to acknowledge all those who contributed to this research. The researchers express gratitude to God for giving them guidance, strength, and wisdom in the process of the research. The researchers would like to acknowledge the guidance, patience, and constant support they received from their research adviser, Gladys S. Escarlos, and her expertise and constructive feedback that enhanced the quality of this study. The researchers also acknowledge their teachers and mentors for sharing their knowledge and insights that helped in the development of this research. A special thanks to the participants for their cooperation and willingness to share their experiences, which were invaluable for this study. The researchers also express their gratitude to their parents and their families for encouragement, understanding, and moral support throughout this process. Finally, the researchers express their gratitude to their friends and classmates for their support, encouragement, and assistance in the completion of this research. The authors would like to thank all who have directly or indirectly contributed to this study.

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