Research Article

Pre-service teachers' reflections on their role in the community-based reading program initiative in Olongapo City: Insights, challenges, and growth

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ABSTRACT

To become an effective teacher, one must understand the role of the community in forging a conducive learning environment for children. This case study examined the experiences of 21 pre-service teachers who were purposively selected to participate in a reading program initiated by a local higher educational institution in the Philippines. The program was generally implemented during the first semester of the 2024-2025 academic year as part of their community-based action research initiative. Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study employed a researcher-developed semi-structured interview questionnaire to gather rich insights from the participants. Data analysis follows a thematic analysis approach, explicitly using the Braun and Clarke (2006) method, to identify and interpret patterns within the narratives shared by the pre-service teachers. The study revealed five prominent themes: the program's impact on student literacy and engagement; the implementation of innovative and diverse teaching strategies; pre-service teacher growth and professional development; challenges faced in teaching and adaptability; and the role of community building and social impact within the program. These findings highlight the multifaceted impact of the reading program on both the pre-service teachers and the student community. The study highlights the importance of immersive educational initiatives in shaping teaching practices, promoting professional growth, and improving student learning outcomes, while also emphasizing the need to address challenges to ensure effective program implementation and community engagement.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, professionalism, literacy and engagement, teaching strategies, adaptability, community-based action research

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INTRODUCTION

Within the dynamic realm of education, the pivotal role of pre-service teachers in shaping the academic landscape and molding young minds stands as a cornerstone of the profession. Teacher education programs that advocate culturally sustainable teaching practices are concerned with providing experiences that develop cultural competencies and dispositions for teaching in diverse environments (Frank & Bogard, 2021). As burgeoning educators, their evolving perspectives, experiences, and reflective insights serve as potent tools in comprehending and enriching educational initiatives. Adarlo and Pelias (2020) noted that the teaching-learning process of conducting a developmental assessment for school children as part of their service learning not only fosters personal awareness but also provides meaningful and relevant opportunities to understand their lived experiences. William et al. (2025) also claimed that ongoing teacher training, particularly for pre-service teachers, plays a crucial role in improving literacy rates in underserved areas. In one article by Landreth and Wilson (2023), they described how pre-service teachers helped provide read-aloud for the local summer reading program. Four themes were identified in the experiences of the participants, which include initial feelings, preparation and planning, lessons learned, and finally, barriers and challenges. In another study by Johnson and Keane (2023), they highlighted the idea that pre-service teachers plan, teach, and reflect on the lessons they teach in their classes. Additionally, a paper on pre-service teachers in the Philippines highlighted the importance of experiential learning reinforcement, suggesting that it may lead to deeper learning through reflective writing (Fuego & de Leon, 2025). This investigation sheds light on a fundamental aspect of teacher development and community involvement within the vibrant educational context of Olongapo City. A local literature claims that pre-service training of teachers is less extensive, and there is a strong association between the extent of pre- and in-service training and their performance (Santos, 2023). One particular research by Tabuenca-Cuevas and Fernandez-Molina (2022) emphasized that there was a limited tradition of reading outside the classroom from the students'

experiences. During the pandemic, virtual tutoring was implemented for the pre-service teachers and showed potential, especially in the local community (Wells, 2021).

Moreover, a distinct relationship exists between pre-service teachers' knowledge at the end of their course and their literacy-based volunteer experiences (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2021). In another related article, the importance of critical literacy experiences in teacher preparation is emphasized as a means of developing a teacher candidate's lens (Briceño & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2022)–conceptualizing skills for creating language assessments as an important component of language assessment literacy. Ho and Yan (2021) emphasized the importance of collaboration in developing language assessment literacy skills for creating assessments tailored to individual prompt writers. More importantly, in the paper by Curiel et al. (2024), they suggest that the pre-service teachers' involvement in the community project heightened their awareness of the importance of utilizing authentic and culturally relevant materials and resources in their classrooms.

Olongapo City, renowned for its educational vibrancy and commitment to academic excellence, serves as a compelling backdrop for this study. A few selected local studies delve into reading programs in Olongapo City (Paguio et al., 2025; Sardina et al., 2025; Valenzuela & Sardina, 2024). However, these literatures present different perspectives among students who participate in reading programs, in which pre-service teachers play a unique role in becoming effective educators in the future. By delving into the reflections of pre-service teachers participating in a reading program initiative, this research seeks to unravel the intricate tapestry of their perceptions, challenges, and contributions in fostering students' literacy skills. Estacio (2025) emphasized that experiential learning programs, such as the reading program initiated by the local government unit, help shape the self-efficacy of future educators, offering valuable insights in enhancing teacher education. These future educators, poised at the threshold of their careers, provide a unique lens through which to examine the intersection of theory and practice, pedagogy and community engagement.

Through a preliminary exploration of pre-service teachers' reflections within the specific context of the reading program initiative, this study aims to unearth invaluable insights that can inform and enhance teacher training programs, fortify community partnerships, and ultimately cultivate a more enriching educational milieu within Olongapo City. By examining the lived experiences, aspirations, and challenges faced by these aspiring teachers, this research not only sheds light on their personal and professional growth but also highlights the transformative impact they can have in driving positive change within the educational landscape of Olongapo City and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this study, the proponents employed a case study research design to achieve the primary research objectives. A case study type research design is a qualitative research method that employs an in-depth examination of a specific case or phenomenon within the real-world context to gain detailed insights into a particular subject. Since the study aims to understand the pre-service teachers' experiences with a reading program initiative, the case study design is appropriate because it provides an in-depth analysis of their experiences within a particular phenomenon. As Priya (2020) stated, the case study is the most prominent methodology for social research. The current study is a social research project; thus, a case study design is appropriate.

Participants

The primary source of data in this study was pre-service teachers from a teacher education institution in Olongapo City, Philippines. A total of 21 participants voluntarily joined the interview. They were also chosen purposively for the study, as the main objective is to explore the experiences of pre-service teachers during the implementation of the reading program spearheaded by the local government unit of Olongapo City. These participants were third year level students taking up bachelor's degree in secondary education. The researchers chose them primarily for their active participation and significant impact during the reading program. At the same time, since they were already in their junior years of learning, they are capable of facilitating a simple lesson for children, especially to improve their reading skills.

Instrument and Data Collection

The proponents of this study developed a semi-structured questionnaire to collect sufficient data for thematic analysis, which aimed to achieve the study's objectives. The interview guide first underwent a validation process, during which the researchers submitted the tool to three experts in the field: a community extension coordinator, a seasoned researcher, and an educator. Their comments, suggestions, and recommendations were considered in revising and improving the research tool.

After constructing the semi-structured questionnaire, the researchers sought permissions and approval letters from relevant institutional officials, including the college dean, assistant dean, and their respective program coordinators. After obtaining their approval and permission, the researchers also obtained the participants' consent as part of the study's ethics protocol. During the face-to-face interview, the researchers conducted it at a time that was most convenient for the participants, when they were free from other school matters. Prior to the actual interview, the researchers established rapport and explained that participation was purely voluntary. They were also informed that if there were any clarifications or unclear statements, they would be contacted again for elaboration and confirmation. The interview typically lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. There were also no incentives or compensation provided to the participants after the study was conducted. The interview ran from June to July 2024. Based on the interview results and with the application of saturation, there were nine participants with unique and interesting reflections which were included in the paper.

Data Analysis

After conducting a thorough one-on-one interview with the participants, the researchers analyzed the data using the thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). It is a six-step process for analyzing qualitative data to identify patterns and themes relevant to a particular study. These steps include familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and writing up the findings. At the same time, upon careful analysis, the researchers also applied the concept of trustworthiness in evaluating the worth of a research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In this manner, the researchers established that the participants' responses were trustworthy and credible.

FINDINGS

The following themes emerged from the analysis of participants' responses regarding their participation in Gordon College's midyear reading program initiative across all barangays in Olongapo City.

Impact on Student Literacy and Engagement

One of the most significant outcomes of the Gordon College's reading program initiative was its role in enhancing student literacy and fostering a love for learning. Participants in the program were observed not only to improve their reading skills but also to develop enthusiasm for learning. The program provided an inclusive and engaging environment that encouraged students to participate in literacy activities with enthusiasm.

The collaborative support of the barangay officials and educators was crucial in ensuring the program's effectiveness. The engagement between volunteers and students contributed to a holistic learning environment that went beyond reading instruction to include personal growth and confidence-building.

> "Observing their enthusiasm as they engage with books and witnessing their growing literacy skills has been incredibly rewarding." (P13)

> "From the outset, it was evident that the program provided a valuable opportunity for children to not only improve their reading and writing skills but also to develop a genuine love for learning." (P16)

> "Beyond the academic benefits of the program, the social well-being of the students was also practiced as they interacted with each other, which is essential in building their confidence and sense of belonging." (P19)

These relevant experiences, provided by the informants, capture the rewarding experience of witnessing children's development in literacy. They highlight the joy derived from seeing a young learner engaged with books and witness their literacy skills flourish. It signifies the profound impact that fostering a love for reading can have on children's educational journeys and overall development.

At the same time, the statements also emphasized the comprehensive benefits of the reading program beyond academic advancement. It underscores how the initiative not only enhances children's literacy skills but also instills in them a passion for learning. By nurturing a genuine love for learning, the program cultivates a mindset that extends far beyond the confines of traditional education, empowering children to become lifelong learners.

Lastly, the informants also disclosed the holistic approach of the program. It recognizes that education goes beyond academic achievements and encompasses social and emotional development. By fostering interactions among students, the program promotes social well-being, boosts confidence, and nurtures a sense of belonging among participants. These social skills are crucial in shaping well-rounded individuals who are not only academically proficient but also empathetic, confident, and socially adept.

Innovative and Diverse Teaching Strategies

Pre-service teachers experimented with various teaching strategies to address the diverse learning needs of their students. Methods such as music videos, flashcards, storytelling, games, group work, and one-on-one instruction were incorporated to increase engagement and comprehension.

This theme emphasizes the importance of differentiated instruction, where teaching is tailored to meet the diverse learning styles of students. By integrating play-based and interactive teaching methods, participants created a more dynamic and practical learning experience.

> "We engaged in various educational activities, from early grade reading assessment (EGRA) and science-related story reading to applying the *Marungko* approach, Phil-IRI assessment, and even conducting recreational activities." (P14)

> "Using a multitude of approaches with music videos, storybooks, flashcards, group study, games, and one-on-one teaching in the areas they lack." (P18)

> "We incorporated more game-based and group approaches when teaching them. By doing so, they enjoyed but also learned at the same time." (P19)

The informants shared some enjoyable experiences which is worth considering for this paper. They highlighted the diverse range of educational strategies employed in the program. These activities span from formal assessments, such as the EGRA and the Phil-IRI assessment, to innovative teaching methods, including the *Marungko* approach. Additionally, the incorporation of science-related story reading and recreational activities signifies a holistic approach to education that aims to engage students in varied learning experiences, catering to different learning styles and interests. They also emphasized the adaptive and multifaceted teaching methods adopted in the program. By utilizing a wide array of resources and techniques such as music videos, storybooks, and flashcards, educators create a dynamic learning environment that caters to diverse learning preferences. The incorporation of group study, games, and personalized one-on-one teaching addresses individual learning needs, ensuring comprehensive support for students across different proficiency levels and subject areas.

Finally, they stressed the effectiveness of interactive and collaborative learning methodologies. The integration of game-based activities and group approaches not only enhances student engagement and enjoyment but also facilitates effective learning outcomes. By creating a dynamic and interactive learning environment, educators promote active participation, critical thinking, and knowledge retention among students, fostering a positive and enriching educational experience.

Pre-Service Teacher Growth and Professional Development

For pre-service teachers, the reading program initiative was not just about teaching students, but also about personal growth. Participants emphasized the importance of patience, empathy, and adaptability–essential traits of effective educators.

Through their experiences, pre-service teachers learned how to adjust their teaching methods, address the students' unique learning needs, and handle real classroom challenges. The experience reinforced their passion for teaching and prepared them for future careers in the field of education.

"I realized how vital patience and empathy are in teaching. We can communicate with them as much and as long as we want; however, if we do not understand them, it will become more difficult for them to learn and for us to teach." (P15)

"This opportunity really helped me to try out different things and showcase my different skills in teaching. It also became a platform to hone my skills and upgrade my understanding of how learning can be facilitated." (P20)

"Now that I have started to open my heart a little more in teaching, I hope this drives me forward in my career as a future educator–I am looking forward to the challenges and what my future holds." (P17)

The reflection on the importance of patience and empathy in teaching is profound. The acknowledgment that communication alone is not sufficient without a deep understanding of the students underscores the significance of emotional intelligence in effective teaching. Demonstrating patience and empathy fosters a supportive learning environment where students feel understood and valued, enabling a more conducive atmosphere for both teaching and learning to thrive. By experimenting with various teaching methods and showcasing diverse skills, the individual not only expanded their teaching repertoire but also refined their instructional abilities. The experience served as a valuable platform for skill development, enhancing their capacity to facilitate learning effectively and adapt to the evolving needs of students. By embracing a more open-hearted approach to teaching, the individual looks forward to embracing the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in their journey as an educator. This attitude of optimism and willingness to grow suggests a promising trajectory towards a fulfilling and impactful career in education, driven by a genuine passion for teaching and a commitment to continuous professional development.

Challenges in Teaching and Adaptability

Despite the program's positive impact, pre-service teachers encountered various challenges in classroom management and engagement. Some students were easily distracted, while others struggled to keep up with the lessons.

These challenges required pre-service teachers to develop new strategies for engagement, improve their classroom management skills, and remain patient and flexible. The experiences allowed them to understand the realities of teaching and adapt to different learning needs.

"There were hardheaded students who were more interested in playing than focusing on learning. This problem really tested my patience and commitment to the role I had as a student-teacher." (P17)

"The community immersion program also gave me a glimpse of what is truly happening in the field and nature of work. It gave me a glimpse of the differences in every student that I handled." (P20)

"This also opens me to different problems and hardships that I can encounter as the process of learning is not equally as fast as possible for every one of my students." (P20)

The challenge of dealing with hardheaded students who prioritize play over learning underscores the complexities of classroom dynamics. This struggle tested the individual's patience and dedication in their role as a student-teacher. Managing students with varying levels of engagement and interests necessitates adaptability and resilience, requiring educators to navigate obstacles while maintaining a supportive and motivating learning environment.

The experiences provided a deeper understanding of the unique characteristics and challenges present in each student, emphasizing the importance of individualized approaches to teaching and the value of recognizing and addressing the differences in student learning styles and abilities.

Lastly, the acknowledgment of the varied pace of learning among students highlights the nuanced nature of the teaching and learning process. Recognizing that students' progress at different rates underscores the importance of personalized instruction and support tailored to individual needs. Embracing the diversity of learning speeds and potential challenges that students may face underscores the educator's commitment to fostering inclusive and effective learning environments that cater to the unique requirements of each learner.

Community Building and Social Impact

The reading initiative fostered mentorship, leadership, and teamwork among students and volunteers. Younger students benefited from peer guidance, while older students and volunteers developed leadership skills. The program emphasized the importance of education as a collective responsibility, underscoring how the involvement of educators, volunteers, and community leaders can foster a more supportive and effective learning environment.

"Younger students have benefited from the guidance and example set by their older peers, while older students have developed leadership and mentoring skills." (P21)

"By bringing together students of different grade levels and ages, the program has fostered a sense of community within the school." (P21)

"With the problem in the literacy rate of our nation, it is up to us to give supplementary assistance and guidance to the youth to ensure that they are learning, not only for their own sake but also for the future of our nation." (P19)

Younger students benefit from the guidance and role modeling provided by their older peers. In comparison, older students have the opportunity to cultivate leadership and mentoring skills. This symbiotic relationship not only enhances the learning experience for both groups but also fosters a supportive and collaborative learning environment, where students can learn from one another. By creating a space where students from various backgrounds and educational stages can interact and collaborate, the program cultivates a sense of unity and belonging within the school community. This inclusive approach promotes social cohesion, mutual respect, and a shared sense of purpose among students, contributing to a positive school culture. By providing supplementary support and guidance to young people, educators play a vital role in not only enhancing individual learning outcomes but also securing the nation's future. Investing in the education and development of young learners is crucial for building a knowledgeable

Table 1. Summary of the thematic analysis

Major themes	Emerging terms	Meaning
Impact on student literacy and engagement	Literacy and engagement	A unique relationship exists between acquiring knowledge and being actively engaged in the learning process, resulting in an enriched educational experience for the individual.
Innovative and diverse teaching strategies	Teaching strategies	Incorporating all of the diverse methods, techniques, and approaches that an educator employs to facilitate learning and enhance student engagement, understanding, and retention.
Pre-service teacher growth and professional development	Professionalism	Embodiment of conduct, demeanor, and ethical standards expected of a particular profession
Challenges in teaching and adaptability	Adaptableness	Capacity and willingness to adjust, evolve, and thrive in response to changes in the circumstances, environments, or challenges
Community building and social impact	Community relevance	Impact and meaningful connection of a particular program or activity held in a specific community or society.

and skilled workforce, fostering national progress, and ensuring a brighter future for generations to come.

Table 1 shows the summary of the thematic analysis.

DISCUSSION

The institution's reading program initiative has emerged as a transformative force in fostering student literacy development and nurturing a profound appreciation for lifelong learning. Adarlo and Pelias (2020) expressively articulated the program's significance as a platform for pre-service teachers to explore and consolidate their teacher identities. By engaging in reflective practices on critical teaching incidents within a supportive environment, participants are empowered to navigate the complexities of the teaching profession with clarity and purpose. Additionally, a related study spearheaded by Arciosa et al. (2022) indicated that the implementation of their literacy program yielded encouraging and comparable results for the residents of their selected community.

Central to the program's success is the creation of an inclusive and stimulating educational environment that not only enhances reading skills but also instills a genuine enthusiasm for knowledge acquisition. Comia et al. (2024) highlighted the invaluable experiences of pre-service teachers as they immersed themselves in diverse learning opportunities, including mentorship from seasoned educators, practical teaching experiences, and the integration of technology in pedagogy. These experiences not only enriched their teaching skills but also honed their ability to adapt flexibly to the dynamic demands of the classroom.

The collaborative character between barangay officials, educators, volunteers, and students has been instrumental in fostering a holistic learning ecosystem that nurtures personal growth and cultivates confidence among participants. In a similar vein, del Valle et al. (2023) shed light on the profound impact of service-learning initiatives on university students who volunteered as tutors in remote rural communities. Another study by De la Rama et al. (2021) supported the findings of this study, as they found that community participation in the extension program led to affirmations based on the quality of the documents submitted or created. Through these experiences, students not only developed essential teaching skills but also cultivated virtues such as patience, empathy, and adaptability, which are foundational for effective teaching practice.

The spectrum of teaching strategies employed within the program reflects a commitment to catering to diverse learning styles and needs. Tabuenca-Cuevas and Fernández-Molina (2022) emphasized the innovative approaches utilized to enhance student engagement and comprehension, bridging the gap between traditional classroom instruction and extracurricular reading activities. By integrating techniques such as music videos, storytelling, and collaborative projects, educators have successfully created a dynamic and interactive learning environment that fosters active participation and enhances knowledge retention.

While the program has yielded positive outcomes, challenges persist in classroom management and student engagement. Briceño and Rodriguez-Mojica (2022) underscored the importance of integrating critical literacy into pedagogical practices and the need for continuous professional development to address these challenges effectively. Dealing with diverse student needs and classroom dynamics requires the development of new instructional strategies, refined classroom management skills, and a mindset of adaptability to ensure optimal learning outcomes for all students. In relation, the previous community extension program study by Dayalo and Potato (2024) claimed that there was a significant improvement in the literacy of children in their adopted community before and after their program intervention.

Moreover, the program's emphasis on mentorship, leadership, and teamwork has catalyzed personal and professional growth among participants. Borines and Marasigan (2024) highlighted the transformative impact of teaching immersion programs on student teachers, underscoring the development of leadership skills and pedagogical competencies. The program's capacity to foster mentorship and collaboration among participants not only enriches the learning experience but also cultivates a culture of shared responsibility and collective growth within the educational community.

Aguillon's (2024) recommendation for an enhanced program to support struggling readers further underscores the program's commitment to inclusivity and educational equity. By advocating targeted interventions to enhance reading proficiency among at-risk students, the program demonstrates its commitment to addressing diverse learning needs and fostering a culture of continuous improvement and support for all learners.

In summary, Gordon College's reading program initiative stands as a beacon of innovation and excellence in educational practice, weaving together elements of reflective teaching, inclusive learning environments, collaborative partnerships, and adaptive pedagogical strategies to foster a community of engaged and empowered learners. Through its multifaceted approach to literacy and teacher development, the program not only enhances academic outcomes but also fosters a culture of lifelong learning, personal growth, and community engagement that extends beyond the classroom, leaving a lasting impact
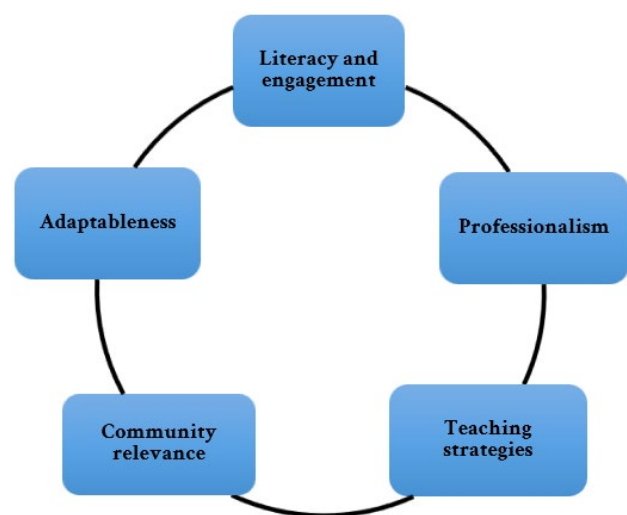
Figure 1. Emerging conceptual framework (LPT-ComAd) (Figure created by authors)

on participants and the broader educational landscape. The study also attempted to create a framework that reflects the experiences pre-service teachers encountered during the implementation of the reading program (see **Figure 1**).

CONCLUSION

Based on the stated objective of this study, several interesting reflections, ideas, and relevant concepts were revealed. The thematic analyses reveal the multifaceted impact of Gordon College's reading program initiative on student literacy, pre-service teacher development, teaching strategies, classroom challenges, and community building. The program has not only enhanced student engagement and literacy skills but has also facilitated personal growth among educators, promoted innovative teaching approaches, and fostered a supportive learning community. By addressing challenges, promoting adaptability, and emphasizing the importance of collective responsibility in education, the program has made significant strides in improving learning outcomes and nurturing a love for learning among students and educators alike.

Limitation and Future Directions

While the current study offered some valuable insights into the experiences of pre-service teachers within a community-based reading program, as with any other study, there were some limitations that need to be considered. First, since the research method was qualitative, there is limited generalizability. Complementing qualitative data with quantitative measures (e.g., student test scores and teacher performance assessments) can provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the program's effectiveness. At the same time, the study's sample is purposively selected, and a few factors may affect its overall outcome. To address this, future studies could involve a larger, more diverse group of pre-service teachers across multiple institutions and regions to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, reliance on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews may be subject to biases, such as social desirability or selective memory, which could affect the authenticity and accuracy of participants' responses. Future research should include perspectives from students, mentor teachers, community members, and program coordinators to gain a holistic

understanding of the program's impact and areas for improvement. Thirdly, the study was conducted over a single academic semester, which may not fully capture the program's long-term impacts on both pre-service teachers and student beneficiaries. To counter this, conducting longitudinal research would help examine the sustained impact of community-based programs on teacher development and student learning outcomes. Lastly, the study focused solely on the experiences of pre-service teachers, omitting direct input from the children who were the recipients of the reading program. This idea leaves a gap in understanding the program's effectiveness from the learners' perspective. Further investigation into specific themes identified in this study–such as adaptability in teaching or community engagement strategies–can yield deeper insights and practical recommendations for future program design and implementation.

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