



From Planning to Practice: A Qualitative Inquiry into Pre-Service Teachers' Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of pre-service teachers during their practicum in primary schools, especially how they designed and delivered English for Children (EFC) programs. It focuses on how they planned lessons, organized their classes, reflected on their teaching experiences, and highlighted the challenges and opportunities that arose. Twenty-two students participated, distributed among five different primary schools. The data were collected through Focus Group Discussions and analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach. The analysis is based on the thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings show that many pre-service teachers lack self-confidence, struggle in dealing with young learners, and have problems with effective communication. However, these challenges also offered growth opportunities. Over the course of the practicum, they gradually acquired 21st-century skills such as collaboration, creativity, adaptability, and effective communication. The experience deepened their understanding of teaching English to children and made them realize the importance of reflecting on what they learned in class. In short, although the teaching practice can be challenging, this study shows that it is an important opportunity for future teachers to improve their skills, become flexible, and develop into reflective educators.

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■ INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to children has become increasingly important worldwide, especially in countries where English is considered a foreign language. Dealing with English in this golden age is seen as the basis for communication skills and intercultural understanding (Garton, 2018) and prepares children for their future academic and professional careers. In Indonesia, the demand for English lessons in primary schools is increasing rapidly due to social and economic changes, including globalization, educational reforms, and parents' expectations for their children (Zein, 2022). However, current data from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education show that of the country's approximately 150,447 primary schools, only 49,219 have qualified English teachers, while the remaining 90,447 have no English teachers at all (sindonewscom, 2025; antaranewscom, 2026). Despite the high social needs, the local infrastructure and support systems are still inadequate.

However, the success of English instruction in primary schools depends on teachers' readiness and skills. Teaching children is different from teaching high school students

or adults, so teaching methods that take into account their developmental level are needed. Children learn best when teaching is playful, interactive, and stimulating (Piaget, 1962). Such teaching lessons often include stories, songs, games, and physical activities and promote active participation (Jiang, 2025; Nazari et al., 2024) or, as Kolb (1984) conceptualized it, "experiential learning," in which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This places high demands on teachers. They must use language skills, pedagogical skills, and the ability to respond to students' emotions in a balanced way to create a meaningful learning environment.

The task of teacher education programs is to train such teachers, with teaching practicum playing a particularly important role. It is considered an indispensable bridge between theory and practice (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012; Richards & Farrell, 2005). Through practical training, prospective teachers can apply the theories they have acquired, evaluate their teaching methods, and experience the atmosphere of a real classroom firsthand. It also requires the ability to reflect,

be flexible, and understand and respond appropriately to the unpredictable reality of the classroom (Kosnik, 2008).

The experiences gained in a school practicum are essential for pre-service teachers to develop their professional identities and teaching philosophy. Implementing their plans in real teaching, however, is not simple. Pre-service teachers often encounter various obstacles, such as difficulties with class management, the need to adapt plans spontaneously, and a loss of self-confidence (Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2022). Especially in primary schools, creativity and flexibility are essential to meet children's unbridled energy, short attention spans, and individual needs. These challenges are not only difficulties, but also valuable learning opportunities. Teachers develop professionally through challenging experiences, and reflecting on setbacks promotes professional growth (Farrell, 2016; Richards, 2015). Against this background, challenges during practicum can be seen as opportunities to strengthen resilience, adaptability, and self-confidence.

The EFC theory-practice gap

The gap between theory and practice in English for Children (EFC) concerns not only general teaching methods but also the conflict between the ideal concept of second language acquisition (SLA) in children and classroom reality. The hypothesis of EFC is based on assumptions from theories of child development (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978) and second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982; Lightbown & Spada, 1993). It prioritizes the acquisition process over learning and emphasizes a natural and immersive learning environment (Krashen, 1985; Pauzan, 2024), task-based learning that promotes meaningful communication through games, songs, and stories (Alisoy Huseyn, 2023; Upadhayaya, 2022), scaffolding and comprehensible input that is adapted to a level slightly above learners' proficiency level, and affective elements that reduce fears and motivate learners.

However, pre-service teachers often encounter obstacles in implementing the concepts. They face challenges such as large classes, diverse language levels, limited resources, pressure from parents and schools to focus on direct grammar instruction and measurable results, and the difficult task of designing lessons that motivate children while avoiding chaos (Garton, 2018). The discrepancy between the ideal of a communication-oriented, child-centered approach and the structured, management-

oriented reality becomes the root problem for EFC student-teachers.

The EFC lesson plan dilemma

Developing lesson plans in EFC requires a balance between promoting language development and effective classroom management. Although student-teachers learn to create lesson plans focused on linguistic objectives, the special circumstances of the EFC class require adaptable, modular, and management-oriented lesson plans. When planning, they should take into account the possibility that games may become too exciting and loud, or, conversely, too difficult and frustrating for children.

In reality, there may be a discrepancy between the learning objectives planned by the teacher and the actual practices in the classroom ("planning-enactment gap"). This is usually caused by unforeseen problems such as children's behavior, time pressure, or lack of resources (Kennedy, 2005; Richards & Farrell, 2011). In the context of EFC in Indonesia, specific indicators of this discrepancy include a significant shift from communication-centered language tasks to behaviorally oriented interventions, a reduction in children's speaking time, and an increase in teacher-led disciplinary actions (Pinilih & Sukarno, 2024; Qarimah et al., 2025). The shift from language production-oriented lessons to behavior management-focused lessons is an essential element of the "planning-enactment gap" in EFC. Student-teachers are challenged to acquire behavior management skills through the activities themselves, which is essential for the success of EFC practice (Blaz, 2022). How they reflect on this balance becomes an important area for qualitative exploration.

Identity formation

Developing a professional identity is not an easy task for EFC student-teachers. They must navigate a complex field of roles with many facets. First, they must be an authentic language model and convey the target language precisely. Second, as motivating teachers, they are under pressure to always appear energetic, cheerful, and entertaining, as an emotionless facial expression could deter young learners (Garton, 2018). Third, as classroom supervisors, they are obliged to enforce clear discipline and rules, which contradicts their desire to be the understanding and empathetic teachers they wanted for themselves. This dilemma between serious pedagogy and entertainment is a sensitive topic that has, so far, been neglected in the development of English teachers' identities (Nazari et al.,

2024). Their practicum reports often reveal the difficulties they face between these contradictory positions.

Emotional experiences

In addition to the emotional aspect of the EFC practicum, there is also the distressing task of teaching a foreign language to young learners. Student-teachers are inevitably nervous about maintaining their pedagogical skills, language proficiency, and natural communication with children (Richards, 2015). Without sufficient support from those around them, they risk burning out in a flash (Turner et al., 2025). There is a strong emotional experience in EFC of disappointment when the lesson plan does not work due to classroom management issues rather than language difficulties.

The substantial literature on teacher practicums lacks descriptive qualitative investigations, particularly those analyzing student-teachers transitioning into EFC classrooms, exposing a fundamental gap. Such studies can highlight the convergence of Second Language Acquisition theory and classroom management, the idealized identity of a language teacher with the realities of serving as both an entertainer and an authority figure, and the emotional strain associated with teaching a foreign language to a specific and demanding audience. This study contributes to the body of knowledge on context-based teacher education methods in Indonesia and worldwide. The research questions that guide the study are as follows:

1. How do pre-service teachers construct their lived experiences across planning and practice stages?
2. How do interaction, context, and continuity shape their experiences during the practicum?
3. What personal and interpersonal challenges influence their transition from planning to practice?

■ METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the experiences of pre-service teachers during their EFC practicum. This methodology was selected because it is ideal for capturing the complex, personal, and contextual experiences of participants, which are essential for understanding the depth of professional development (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thematic analysis is therefore appropriate to this design as it enables the systematic identification of patterns across participants

while maintaining the richness of individual accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Teacher identities are fluid and relational, formed through social interactions (Sun & Akbar, 2023). In this sense, the descriptive qualitative approach is the most suitable epistemology and methodology for the research objectives, as it enables the identification of cross-participant patterns and the contextualized exploration of individual experiences.

Research Context and Participants

The study involved five primary schools in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, focusing on pre-service teachers participating in the EFC practicum. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who were expected to provide essential and meaningful information on the research topic (Creswell, 2018). Twenty-two pre-service teachers from an English Education program in Indonesia worked on the design and implementation of English for Children (EFC) programs for primary school students. They were divided among five schools, where they collaboratively developed lesson plans, conducted teaching, and reflected on their teaching practice.

The participants were purposively selected based on the criteria (a) final-year students enrolled in an English teacher education program, (b) active involvement in the EFC practicum project, and (c) willingness to share their experiences and reflections. This study prioritizes collaborative practicum experiences across diverse school contexts, in contrast to studies that concentrate on individual placements, hence facilitating a more extensive examination of shared and negotiated teaching practices. To provide a clearer profile of the participants, Table 1 summarizes their demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participating Pre-Service Teachers (N=22)

Characteristic	Category	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Age (Years)	21	5	22.7
	22	13	59.1
	23	4	18.2
Gender	Male	6	27.3
	Female	16	72.7
GPA	3.00 – 3.49	9	40.9
	3.50 – 4.00	13	59.1
Practicum duration	8 weeks	22	100

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection was primarily conducted through a semi-structured Focus

Group Discussion (FGD). The FGD session was carefully structured to ensure balanced participation. Participants were clustered into groups of 4-5 based on their school groups. The moderator began with open-ended questions for the entire group, then systematically called on each cluster to speak, ensuring the quieter voices were included. Additionally, participants were encouraged to write short responses on sticky notes before sharing them verbally, which prevented more vocal members from dominating the conversation. This modified procedure is in line with recommendations for large FGDs (Nyumba et al., 2018). This helps to gather data through participants' interactions, deepens their shared understanding of the experiences, recapitulates common events, and develops meanings jointly (Kitzinger, 1995; Nyumba et al., 2018).

An FGD guide was developed, consisting of open-ended questions on the components of the teaching process, such as lesson planning and preparation, classroom management and teaching delivery, self-assessment and reflection on the teaching practice, as well as challenges and opportunities that emerged. The FGD was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure the validity of the analysis. The FGD was conducted in English, but some participants sometimes responded in Indonesian. All responses in Indonesian were manually translated into English by the researchers during transcription to maintain consistency in data analysis.

Data Analysis

The data from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were first transcribed and then analyzed using thematic analysis, which is compatible with a descriptive qualitative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sandelowski, 2000). The analysis was conducted iteratively following the procedure of qualitative content analysis. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts to gain an overall grasp of participants' experiences. Second, to systematically manage and reduce the data, all transcripts were imported into QCAmap (an open-access web application for qualitative content analysis). Initial coding was performed in QCAmap using a mixed deductive-inductive approach. A preliminary codebook was developed based on the interview guide (planning, classroom implementation, reflection), and additional codes were added inductively as new concepts emerged from the data. Third, these codes were organized into broader main categories and subcategories that represented shared patterns of experience

across participants.

The analysis emphasized the collective meanings that emerged from group discussions, highlighting how experiences gained shared significance through mutual interaction (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The themes were reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure they could adequately address the research questions. Finally, the findings were interpreted by linking them to the theoretical perspectives of teacher education and experiential learning. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, the researchers engaged in peer debriefing and iterative review of the coding process. Data saturation was considered achieved when no new themes or insights emerged from the data (Guest et al., 2006).

Data triangulation

Triangulation techniques were used to verify the trustworthiness of the data. First, *member checking* was conducted by returning the transcribed content of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to the participants to verify whether their reported experiences were consistent with their actual experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, a cross-analysis was conducted in which participants' FGD narratives were compared with their final project reports, which documented the practicum's planning, implementation, and evaluation. This document analysis confirmed or refuted the stories discussed in the FGD. The researchers focused on how participants reported their teaching practices and how these reports matched the written documentation of their collaborative work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This dual triangulation strategy helped reduce individual bias and broaden perspectives, thereby increasing the reliability of insights into pre-service teachers' practices.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to established ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose of the study, data collection procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by using pseudonyms for participants and institutions. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board (Ethics Committee) of the Directorate of Research and Community Service, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta (Approval No. T/6.32/UN34.9/KP.06.07/2024).

■ RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic map illustrates the organization of the study's findings around

three research questions that examine how pre-service teachers construct, experience, and navigate their practicum voyage from planning to practice. RQ1 tracks the evolution of lived experience through four phases: initial strengths and expectations, the reality gap, growth and adaptability, and emerging professional identity. RQ2 explores the aspects that shape interaction (group dynamics), context (cultural norms of “*nggak enak*” and situational ambiguity), and continuity (connecting experience to future professional identity). RQ3 shows that the personal challenges (self-doubt, time management) and interpersonal challenges (WhatsApp communication failures, read receipt culture) make the transition from planning to practice difficult. All these themes together lead to a cross-cutting synthesis: professional identity is not established in isolation but co-constructed in collaboration, with cultural values and digital communication practices. The subsequent sections present each research question in turn with supporting participant voices and contextual evidence from the FGD.

To illustrate the dynamic changes in pre-service teachers’ experiences in the different phases of the practicum, a Sankey diagram (Figure 1) was created using the online tool SankeyMatic. The diagram follows the movement of thematic codes that emerged in the planning phase (initial confidence, idealistic expectations, collaborative readiness) through the reality shock phase (self-doubt, communication breakdowns, “*nggak enak*” hesitation) and into the adaptation and growth phase (problem-solving, emerging professional identity, acceptance of collaboration as

essential). The width of each flow corresponds to the proportion of participants whose experiences match that trajectory. While not all 22 participants took the same path, the diagram captures dominant transition patterns, visually showing that professional development is seldom linear but involves a contraction of confidence followed by an expansion of adaptive competencies.

RQ1. How do Preservice Teachers Construct Their Lived Experiences across Planning and Practice Stages?

The findings are presented as interconnected themes that depict pre-service teachers’ experiences as they transitioned from the planning phase to teaching practice. These themes not only reflect recurring patterns but also the evolution of participants’ experiences, consisting of their initial strengths, the challenges they face, and their growing professional awareness.

Sub-theme 1.1: entering the practicum: initial strengths and expectations

At the start of the practicum, participants had high confidence in their abilities to work collaboratively and contribute to the project. Many highlighted prior experiences and interpersonal skills as key strengths.

"I've often managed events like this since I joined EDSA for 2 years. I also have more experience, relationships, and information than other friends, especially my partner (P15). I also understand the job descriptions of other divisions so that I can help." (P3_School1)

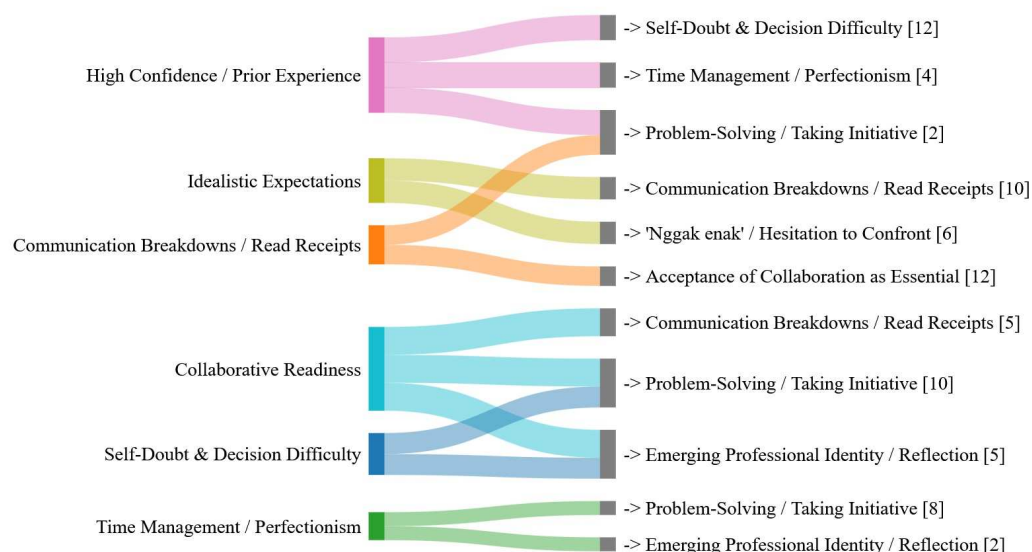


Figure 1. The dynamic changes in pre-service teachers’ experiences in the different phases of the practicum

"I am very enthusiastic about running this practicum event. I also always participate in every school observation. I am very open with other friends." (P4_School1)

"I have been experienced in teaching for about 3 months in kindergarten. I would like to say, with my experience, I could adapt and participate well in this project." (P10_School3)

These responses show that participants came into the practicum with favorable expectations and felt ready, placing themselves as capable contributors to the team.

Sub-theme 1.2: Encountering the reality of practice

As participants entered the practice, their experiences became more complex and challenging. They had difficulties with assertiveness, decision-making, time management, and understanding task expectations. This is often expressed in the cultural concept of "nggak enak": a fear of confrontation and a preference for harmonious relationships over task completion. This reflects a Javanese culture, namely, maintaining relational harmony (*rukun*) and avoiding direct conflict. One participant noted,

"I often feel 'nggak enak' to tell my partner to do her job description. If it is wrong, I will fix it myself. I've been friends with her since the first semester, so sometimes she takes her assignments for granted because she knows I'll finish them myself in the end." (P3_School1)

"My weakness is that I often find it difficult to make decisions. This has been a struggle for me throughout the project, especially when we have to choose between two good options or when time is running out." (P20_School5)

"It took so much time for me to understand the whole project. Sometimes there is a moment when I cannot grasp a concept and miss it, leaving me unsure what to do. I felt left behind because others seemed to grasp things faster." (P10_School3)

These findings reveal a change from idealized expectations to practical realities that require participants to manage uncertainty, emotional distress, and cognitive load.

Sub-theme 1.3: transforming through practice:

developing competence

Despite challenges, participants demonstrated growth through collaboration and problem-solving. One participant noted,

"My biggest strength in this project is that I was able to communicate well within my division, such as discussing ideas for games and lesson plans and actively participating in finding solutions to problems that the academic division faced. I feel proud that we could solve issues together without blaming each other." (P11_School3)

"I'm quite extrovert; I also have a little experience in English holiday activities with children, so I have some ideas for academic activities and learned some lessons that can be developed for the activities we will do next. I don't feel burdened by the existing tasks because in the academic group we divide the tasks so that they are fair and still help each other if there are difficulties." (P14_School4)

These experiences indicate that participants were not only applying pedagogical knowledge but also actively constructing practical teaching skills through collaboration and problem-solving.

Participants also took on operational tasks such as logistics management, school coordination, and administrative activities. These tasks contributed to the development of organizational and project management skills, which are essential in real-life teaching contexts.

"I was able to ensure that the documentation was comprehensive and accurate. Additionally, my creativity in decoration played a key role in the project's presentation. In terms of documentation, it is important to clearly communicate the technical and creative aspects, while decoration requires careful thought to create a cohesive visual environment." (P22_School5)

Through these experiences, the participants gained a broader understanding of their role as teachers, which, in addition to teaching, also included administrative tasks and organizational responsibilities. Besides, they demonstrated the ability to adapt to real-world limitations. In the event of unclear instructions or role changes, they responded proactively and took steps to ensure the project's continuity. This reflects the development of flexible

problem-solving skills, which are essential in a dynamic and unpredictable teaching environment.

Sub-theme 1.4: Becoming: Emerging Professional Awareness and Identity

Experiences began to shape participants' deeper, although still developing, understanding of professional roles and responsibilities. They understood that initiative, accountability, and good communication were important components of collaborative work. For example, one participant highlighted their ability to *"ensure open communication and contribute to a positive working environment"* (P8_School2), while another emphasized *"actively participating in finding solutions to problems"* (P11_School3).

These reflections suggest a growing sense of professionalism not just in doing the job, but also in contributing to team effectiveness. Participants also identified positive and negative behaviors among team members, which helped them form clearer expectations of professionalism. One participant appreciated peers.

"P20, she is very initiative and always follows up on what needs to be done as a coordinator," (P12_School3)

while others criticized members who *"barely join group discussion, they just work when the event will be held"* (P7_School2) or *"do not contribute fully, some do not attend the meeting and do not help other members much"* (P15_School4).

Such contrasting experiences helped participants draw distinctions between productive and unproductive professional behaviors. Many participants increased their knowledge of teamwork, from merely completing individual tasks to shared responsibility and interdependence. As one participant noted,

"We divide the tasks so that they are fair and still help each other if there are difficulties," (P14_School4)

while another expressed that their group

"the five of us are very solid. I am very proud of the academic group's hard work. Me, P4, P11, P10, P19, the 5 of us help each other and work together; very grateful to have partners like them." (P4_School1)

These statements reflect a shift toward

collaborative engagement and mutual accountability. Participants also became more reflective about their strengths and weaknesses, identifying areas for improvement in assertiveness, time management, and communication.

Additionally, participants gained a greater awareness of the necessity to balance personal relationships with professional responsibilities. One participant revealed that a peer.

"took tasks lightly because she knew I would finish them" (P3_School1)

The findings showed that collaboration during the practicum is central to pre-service teachers' development. They supported each other, negotiated roles, solved problems, and managed group dynamics. Their professional skills are not acquired alone, but developed together through collaboration. Through these experiences, they reflected on teamwork, responsibility, and communication skills, and gradually formed themselves into professional teachers. The transition from the planning phase to actual practice is therefore continuous and continually developed through interaction with others. In short, learning to teach is inseparable from learning to collaborate.

RQ2. How do Interaction, Context, and Continuity Shape Their Experiences during the Practicum?

The findings further reveal that participants' experiences were not constructed in isolation but were shaped by interaction, contextual conditions, and the continuity of experience.

Sub-theme 2.1: Interaction: Negotiating collaboration and communication

The interactions within group discussions, collaboration, and communication shaped much of the participants' practicum experience. Participants' experiences were largely shaped by their involvement in collaborative group work across different divisions. Many had strong interpersonal skills, actively participated in discussions, shared ideas for lesson planning, and supported their peers in completing tasks.

"Our group works very well; there is almost no miscommunication between us, and we always maintain good relationships between members. We work together seriously and also with a small amount of humor to break the ice; we give each other opinions in discussions, and we also listen to each other's opinions well without judging each other."

(P4_School1)

"We fixed and solved all the problems together; so I think that's the greatest thing we did so far; even though we argued first about the job descriptions. When the event is held, I hope my group will still help each other." (P7_School2)

"We have a pretty good cooperation in the team, although there are some who do not contribute fully, some do not attend the meeting and do not help other members much." (P15_School4)

"My group is going well because we help each other. We always communicate if someone has a problem or cannot attend a meeting." (P16_School4)

"Very good at working together, and will be ready to help each other. We have a system where if one person is struggling, another will step in without being asked." (P1_School1)

However, collaboration did not always go smoothly. While some groups were described as very solid and supportive, others struggled with communication problems, lack of responsiveness, and uneven participation. There were even reports that only a few members completed the tasks while others hardly participated.

"Communication in this group work is still lacking. This is the first project with no reference material, making it difficult for us to work on it." (P6_School2)

"Not good enough. We have poor communication, especially when I share information in the group; no one responds (they read and don't care). I have reported this in the group many times, but more than once or twice, it was just ignored and there was no response at all." (P17_School4)

Despite these challenges, many groups managed to overcome disagreements, resolve conflicts, and continue to work towards common objectives.

As these experiences show, cooperation in the practicum settings is dynamic and requires constant negotiation. Successes and

failures were valuable learning experiences. Through positive and challenging interactions, participants learned the importance of communication, shared responsibility, and mutual support in achieving collective outcomes.

Sub-theme 2.2: Context: Cultural and situational influences

Participants' experiences were also influenced by contextual factors like cultural norms, digital communication practices, and task ambiguity. The cultural notion of "nggak enak" influenced participants' reluctance to confront their peers, and unclear project guidelines led to confusion and uncertainty.

"I feel 'nggak enak' to tell my partner to do her job description. If it is wrong, I will fix it myself. I've been friends with her since the first semester, so sometimes she takes her assignments for granted because she knows I'll finish them myself in the end." (P3_School1)

"This is the first project with no reference material, making it difficult for us to work on it. We don't have a template or previous example to follow, so everything is trial and error." (P6_School2)

These findings imply that participants' behaviors were not only individual choices but were also molded by the broader cultural and situational contexts in which they communicated, made decisions, and carried out responsibilities.

Sub-theme 2.3: Continuity: Linking experience and future identity

The previous experiences of the participants influenced their engagement with the practicum, and their current experiences contributed to their future professional identity.

"I have been experienced in teaching for about 3 months in kindergarten. I want to say that, based on my experience, I could adapt to and participate well in this project. However, teaching kindergarten is different from primary school, so I still had to learn new strategies for managing older children." (P10_School3)

This reflects the principle of continuity, that is, the conception of experience as a relationship between past, present, and future, which influences the way participants envision themselves as future educators.

RQ3. What Personal and Interpersonal Challenges Influence Their Transition from Planning to Practice?

In the transition from planning to practice, participants encountered a variety of personal and interpersonal problems that frequently intersected and influenced their experiences.

Sub-theme 3.1: Personal Challenges: Internal struggles and self-regulation

The major internal obstacles that emerged during the practicum were emotional and cognitive challenges. Participants reported experiencing self-doubt, difficulty making decisions, and confusion about grasping the project's requirements.

"My weakness is that I often find it difficult to make decisions. This has been a struggle for me throughout the project, especially when we have to choose between two good options or when time is running out." (P20_School5)

"My weaknesses in this project that I still have to overcome are doubts about the ability of the academic division to do the whole task well, especially doubts about myself. I sometimes wonder if I am good enough to be leading this division." (P11_School3)

"It took so much time for me to understand the whole project. Sometimes there is a moment when I cannot grasp a concept and miss it, leaving me unsure what to do. I felt left behind because others seemed to grasp things faster." (P10_School3)

These responses indicate that participants faced both emotional challenges, such as low confidence and self-doubt, and cognitive difficulties related to understanding tasks and expectations. Such conditions may have limited their ability to take initiative and make decisions during the practicum. These challenges highlight limitations in self-regulation and emotional resilience, which affected participants' ability to take initiative and perform effectively.

Sub-theme 3.2: Time management difficulties

Time management became a big issue with participants admitting to perfectionism and task focus. One participant noted,

"My weakness was focusing too much on small details to make everything perfect, which sometimes slowed me down. I'm working on balancing quality with efficiency. One time, I focused too much on one task and forgot about another. Next time, I will use a checklist to help me do better." (P13_School4)

"I noticed the need to improve time management skills, especially in balancing the documentation and decoration tasks simultaneously. While I was able to complete both aspects successfully, I believe better planning could have helped streamline the process." (P22_School5)

These responses indicate that the participants experienced difficulties with self-regulation, particularly in planning, prioritizing, and monitoring their work. Such issues are related to executive function, which is crucial for managing complex activities in professional settings (Lai & Viering, 2020).

Additionally, some participants stated that unclear project directions contributed to their difficulty managing time. They found themselves confused by the work expectations in situations labeled as "no reference material" or "still unclear," which hampered their ability to allocate time efficiently. This shows that problems with time management were not only individual but also context-dependent. These findings underscore the necessity of developing adaptive skills to handle both structured and ambiguous tasks, which are critical in dynamic, unpredictable real teaching settings.

Sub-theme 3.3: Interpersonal challenges: Communication barriers

Communication breakdowns emerged as a persistent challenge, particularly in digital spaces such as WhatsApp groups. One participant lamented,

"Not good enough. We have poor communication, especially when I deliver information to the group; no one responds. (Just read and I don't care.) I have reported this in the group many times, but more than once or twice, it was just ignored and there was no response at all." (P17_School4)

"Sometimes I feel afraid to speak about my opinion to others. I worry that my

ideas might be rejected or that I might sound stupid, so I often stay quiet even when I have something to contribute." (P19_School5)

"I was too excited about this program, but my other friends had a low response when I needed backup. I felt that my enthusiasm was not shared by others, which was disappointing." (P17_School4)

"Communication in this group work is still lacking. This is the first project without reference material, which makes it difficult for us to work on it. We don't have a template or previous example to follow, so everything is trial and error." (P6_School2)

These responses suggest that communication barriers were not only due to a lack of interaction but also to emotional reluctance, low responsiveness, and low participation among group members. This indicates that successful communication in collaborative situations necessitates interpersonal confidence and active participation.

The phenomenon of "read receipt culture," as reflected in participants' experiences, indicates difficulties in digital communication practices. One instance involved participants working on a shared PowerPoint presentation. After broadcasting the request in the WhatsApp group and receiving no response, P17_School4 privately messaged each member. While one member (P7_School2) eventually contributed, two other members (P13_School4 and P21_School5) remained indifferent. Consequently,

"P8 and I filled out the PPT link ourselves" (P17_School4).

Thus, read receipt culture did not merely create annoyance; it directly delayed task completion, increased workload on active members, and contributed to uneven participation.

Cross-Case Synthesis

Although the participants' experiences occurred within diverse groupings and roles, the cross-case analysis identified common patterns in how pre-service teachers constructed their professional learning and identity during the practicum. The move from planning to practice, in these accounts, was not a linear process but a continual negotiation

shaped by collaboration, challenges, and adaptation in actual teaching environments.

There was a clear story throughout the accounts that collaborative practice was crucial in shaping participants' experiences. Learning to manage duties, resolve tensions, and sustain group work occurred in a dynamic setting shaped by interactions with peers, including cooperation, miscommunication, and unequal participation. These interactions were not just situational but also a critical tool for participants to build communication, responsibility, and problem-solving skills. In this view, professional competence was not an individual achievement, but a socially constructed process produced via participation in shared practice.

The synthesis also reveals how the participants' perceptions of professionalism were influenced by reflections on positive and negative collaboration experiences. Participants observed both beneficial and unproductive professional behaviors, including supportive teamwork and disengagement among colleagues. Through this process of reflection, participants became more conscious of the necessity of taking initiative, responsibility, and mutual support, while also becoming aware of the tensions between preserving personal relationships and the need to be accountable.

Finally, participants displayed flexibility in the settings, despite difficulties such as a lack of clarity in the task structure and inconsistent participation. These limitations did not hinder their development but rather inspired them to adjust roles, take initiative, and keep the project moving forward. The cross-case synthesis reveals that the development of pre-service teachers' professional identity is a dynamic, evolving process driven by interaction, reflection, and contextual needs, in which learning to teach is closely intertwined with learning to collaborate.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was achieved by comparing the FGD transcripts with the practicum's final report. The cross-comparison was used to validate or challenge the participants' spoken accounts against written documentation. Table 2 presents a summary of the comparison between the two data sources and three representative themes: communication breakdowns, uneven participation, and the academic team's success. In each case, the final report corroborated the experiences shared by FGD participants, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings.

Figure 1. The dynamic changes in pre-service teachers' experiences in the different phases of the practicum

Theme	FGD Participant Quote	Excerpt from Final Report	Alignment
Communication breakdowns	<i>"Not good enough. We have poor communication, especially when I deliver an information on group; no responses from the others (just read and I don't care)"</i> (P17_School4)	<i>"There were many miscommunications between members, the lack of solidarity that made organizing this event require extra patience."</i> (Chapter I, p. 6)	Confirmed: Both sources highlight poor communication and lack of responsiveness as significant issues.
Uneven participation	<i>"P21: He never completes the assigned tasks, even though he has only given very small tasks..."</i> (P3_School1); <i>"P15: She procrastinates past the deadline..."</i> (P3_School1)	<i>"Some members are less active in participating... Imbalance of member attendance at meetings. Only the same people are present."</i> (Co-Director evaluation, Chapter II, p. 24)	Confirmed: Both sources identify specific members and a general pattern of uneven contribution and absenteeism.
Success of academic team	<i>"...in the academic side, the five of us (P4, P14, P11, P10, P19) are very solid."</i> (P4_School1); <i>"I do not hesitate to actively interact with them so I can say that the academic division is very solid."</i> (P11_School3)	<i>"...the five of us help each other and work together, very grateful to have partners like them."</i> (Academic division reflection, Chapter II, p. 30)	Confirmed: Both sources consistently portray the academic division as a cohesive, high-functioning team.

From Readiness to Uncertainty: Identity as an Evolving Process

The findings revealed that the participants were highly confident at the outset, largely due to their prior experience and expertise (Ncube & Ajani, 2025). The interview results verify this (as shown in P3_School1). This confidence affected their expectations at the beginning of the practicum, where they were seen as capable and ready participants in the educational setting. Many participants felt that their prior experience in teaching or related activities would improve their performance in the practicum. Based on their experience, the beginning of the implementation phase created complex issues that gradually undermined their confidence (Jansky, 2026; Jin & Kim, 2026; Yeh, 2024). This is in line with the gap between their idealized expectations at the beginning and the realities of the implementation phase. The flexibility of the real teaching context required a quick response to unforeseen

circumstances that were not fully anticipated from the outset. This illustrates the possible limitations of the initial confidence in the teaching context.

Moreover, these experiences imply that professional identity is not solely shaped by prior preparation but is continuously constructed and reconstructed through challenges and collaborative practice (Nazari et al., 2024; Sumarniningsih et al., 2026; Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2022). Thus, the participants' involvement in teaching issues and collaboration with other practitioners helped them determine their professional identities and gain a better grasp of the complexities of teaching.

Learning Through Collaboration: Identity as Social Construct

Group work and collaboration in the practicum had an impact on participants' learning and professional development.

Positive collaborative experiences included mutual support, effective teamwork, and cooperation in problem-solving, resulting in project completion, improved efficiency, and a productive work environment. On the other hand, negative collaboration experiences were associated with miscommunication, lack of engagement, and difficulties assigning tasks and responsibilities within the group. Such differences show that collaboration is not always effective and requires active participation, effective communication, and reciprocal responsibility. Participants learned valuable lessons about how effective collaborative processes may be in real educational settings, through both effective and ineffective collaboration. Most importantly, participants began to reflect on their personal role in the group, including what they contributed, how they communicated, and their shared responsibility for the group's goals. This also enabled the development of personal and professional skills, notably in group work and conflict management.

Professional competence and identity are not acquired in isolation. They develop through practical experience and interactions and relationships with others. Collaboration is not only useful for completing tasks but also an important way to learn from each other, negotiate, and shape participants' identities. This is in line with current research, which shows that a collaborative learning environment is essential for the development of social, cognitive, and professional competencies through interaction (Järvenoja et al., 2024; Sandar & Kalman, 2022). Therefore, it is justified to consider that learning to teach is also learning to collaborate, because the ability to collaborate is essential for an effective teacher. This also aligns with the view that teaching is a profession grounded in human relationships. In this context, it is necessary to remove the barriers to overcome different opinions and interpersonal relationships, and for everyone to take responsibility for achieving a common goal. This is why collaboration in the practicum is an invaluable basis for pre-service teachers to develop their professional competence and establish themselves as constantly evolving teachers.

The Role of Context: Culture, Structure, and Situational Conditions

Practicum experience is influenced by individual competence and contextual conditions, including cultural, task-related, and communicational factors (Liu et al., 2023; Yue et al., 2024). The participants' reluctance to

take part in confrontational exchanges (e.g., giving feedback or opinions) is indicative of the influence of sociocultural conditions that advocate harmony rather than outspoken critique, a phenomenon observed in various Asian educational settings, such as in China and Vietnam (Nguyen & Tesar, 2024; Phuong-Mai et al., 2005; Yip et al., 2022). This tendency also applies to Yogyakarta, where Javanese cultural values such as *rukun* (social harmony) often discourage confrontation in collaborative settings. *Rukun*, which is described as preserving relationships and compatibility while resolving issues peacefully, can manifest as pseudo-harmony, in which relationships are maintained by suppressing conflicts rather than openly addressing them (Faturochman et al., 2013). In such situations, maintaining harmonious relations may take precedence, potentially inhibiting free discussion and effective coordination. Also, limited instructions or guidance could constrain participants' knowledge of the task's circumstances, as noted in the collaborative learning field (Sandar & Kalman, 2022; Yue et al., 2024). Moreover, the conditions of digital communication also increase the likelihood of limiting effective interaction and coordination, especially when challenges arise from both synchronous and asynchronous communication (Herlianto et al., 2022). Taken together, these data show that successful communication in collaborative settings involves not only frequent interaction but also responsiveness and individual accountability.

Overall, these findings indicate that the participants' experiences were strongly shaped by specific social and situational factors rather than dictated by their individual competence. Cultural expectations, task design, and communication practices all came together to influence how participants interacted, made decisions, and shared responsibilities. This shows that learning in a practicum setting is intrinsically contextual, requiring practitioners to be flexible in response to contextual constraints and opportunities. Hence, understanding practicum experiences needs to take into account not just what the participants do, but also the circumstances in which their activities are carried out.

Constraints as Opportunities: Developing Agency and Adaptability

The results demonstrate that participants' responses to challenges were characterized by their efforts to understand unclear roles and shifting responsibilities. Rather than being constrained by these limitations, participants demonstrated agency by actively negotiating

and managing the practicum's requirements. This was particularly evident in their utilization of creativity to address practical challenges encountered in real classroom settings. These encounters required participants to confront unpredictability and make decisions in complex, dynamic situations, illustrating their evolving adaptability.

Importantly, the findings suggest that constraints in the practicum did not merely inhibit participants' performance but rather served as generative spaces that facilitated the development of agency and professional growth. This is in line with studies indicating that teacher learning is shaped by engagement with complex and unpredictable environments, in which adaptability and agency emerge as important professional competencies (Ncube & Ajani, 2025; Nguyen & Tesar, 2024; Yeh, 2024; Yue et al., 2024). Adversity has also been found to promote creativity and problem-solving, allowing teachers to express agency even under structural constraints (Järvenoja et al., 2024; Nazari et al., 2024; Sumarningsih et al., 2026; Yip et al., 2022). In this regard, the practicum is a vital setting in which pre-service teachers build the capacity to adapt, make decisions, and exercise agency in complex and evolving teaching contexts.

Integrating Experience: Learning to Teach as Learning to Collaborative and Adaptive Practice

The findings show that learning to teach is not a linear progression but a dynamic and constantly negotiated process. Participants' experiences followed a trajectory from initial confidence to moments of hardship, to adaptation, and finally to greater professional awareness. This evolution was not uniform but built up through continuing interaction with peers, contextual conditions, and reflection on both successful and challenging experiences. In this view, professional learning is a socially constructed, contextually mediated process in which knowledge and competence are developed through collaborative practice rather than through individual effort alone (Järvenoja et al., 2024; Sandar & Kalman, 2022). Moreover, the importance of experience and reflection underscores that the learning process throughout the practicum is grounded in lived experience and that meaning is continuously reconstructed over time (Nguyen & Tesar, 2024; Yue et al., 2024). These processes also demonstrate the development of key 21st-century skills, such as collaboration, adaptation, problem-solving, and communication, which are vital for navigating complex and unexpected teaching contexts (Ervin, 2026; van Laar et al., 2020). Thus, the

practicum can be considered not just a site for the application of theoretical knowledge but also a site of becoming where pre-service teachers actively construct their professional identity and simultaneously develop the competencies required for contemporary education (Nazari et al., 2024; Sumarningsih et al., 2026; Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2022).

■ CONCLUSION

This descriptive qualitative study has revealed that teaching practice is more than an opportunity for pre-service teachers to practice instructional techniques; it is a transformative space where they face challenges, seize opportunities, and build the competencies required for 21st-century education. Through experiences of active participation in real teaching environments, pre-service teachers developed key professional skills, particularly in collaboration, communication, adaptation, and reflective practice. These findings underscore the social and contextual nature of learning to teach, which is not a solitary, linear process but a socially constructed experience in which competence is developed through interaction, negotiation, and shared responsibility. The challenges encountered by participants, such as the hesitation to delegate, communication breakdowns, time management issues, and self-doubt, were not just barriers but were also key sites of learning. Navigating these difficulties, they developed resilience, assertiveness, and a deeper understanding of effective collaboration. At the same time, the experiences in which they participated in leading, creating, adapting, and reflecting formed the basis of building the complex skill set needed in today's educational environments. The experiences of these pre-service teachers as they transitioned from planning to practice represented a non-linear trajectory modified by interaction, contextual conditions, and continual reflection. Their accounts demonstrate that becoming a teacher is a dynamic and evolving process, one that involves negotiating challenges, building relationships, and constructing meaning through practice. This study underscores that the practicum is not just a place to apply information, but a vital space for becoming, where professional identity and competence are co-created through lived experience.

Thus, this study offers several recommendations for teacher education institutions. First, curricula for teaching practicum should include structured, graded reflective practice (e.g., guided journals and peer evaluation) and purposeful collaborative problem-solving (e.g., paired placements or

small-group action research). Second, cooperating teachers need specific mentorship training to help pre-service teachers handle failures and self-doubt. Finally, assessment rubrics should move from instructional methodologies to indicators of adaptation, negotiation, and co-constructed practice. If implemented, these modifications would turn the practicum into a consciously intended ecology for professional becoming, not merely a place for the application of knowledge.

• DISCLOSURE OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

During the writing of this manuscript, the author(s) employed ChatGPT to assist with language refinement and proofreading. The author(s) have reviewed and edited the content generated by this tool and take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript. Additionally, the author(s) used QCAmap to analyze the data and confirm the integrity of the analytical process.

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