Bridging the Gap: Understanding the Experiences of First-Year Pre-Service Teachers Transitioning from High School to College

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Abstract— Transition is crucial for every individual. All over the world, learners face several challenges in the academic field, especially concerning their transition to another level. The primary objective of this paper was to understand the transition experiences of first-year students of the Bataan Peninsula State University, Balanga Campus. This study utilized a qualitative approach and phenomenological methodology to grasp the perspectives and insights of the participants fully. This included first-year pre-service teachers under the Bachelor of Secondary Education Program. Data was collected through an online interview with the participants. Analysis was conducted through a thematic approach using the MAXQDA program, which aided in developing themes and subthemes. The study revealed that pre-service teachers experienced both positive and negative emotions, such as excitement, anxiousness, culture shock, pressure, sadness, and nervousness. Also, internal expectations include mindset and adjustment, external expectations comprise immature classmates and a new environment, while the full schedule is an academic expectation. Their academic identity covered personal skills such as discipline, academic-social balance, character, and self-confidence. Moreover, this paper highlighted the differences between high school and college learning environments, which are teaching methods comprising a teacher-centered approach, learner-centered approach, and spoon-feeding; learning experiences, particularly knowledge acquisition and independent study; high school experiences, namely spoiled in high school, and less stress in high school. Coping mechanisms employed by the pre-service teachers in managing the challenges associated with their transition featured self-improvement, specifically self-realization and physical and mental health; study skills, including study habits, reading; and time optimization, time efficiency, and time management.

Keywords— pre-service teachers, transition, experiences.

INTRODUCTION

A student's education undergoes a significant transition when they go from secondary school to college, which is marked by increased freedom and responsibility. In contrast to high school, when they typically adhere to a rigid timetable under strict supervision, college students have greater independence. They must make decisions in their personal and academic lives and handle their own time while in college. Building abilities in independently driven learning and motivation requires more independence (Ezra et al., 2024). Students' awareness of their autonomy grows as they progress through college, which can improve their academic performance and make their time there more enjoyable (Yen, 2024).

Since students must adapt to higher academic requirements and new social situations, this change may be both exciting and frightening. It can be challenging for many first-year students to

Develop productive study habits, build a support system, and balance their academic obligations with their personal lives. According to research, these students frequently face significant obstacles that can hinder their academic performance, such as issues with managing their time and the need to socialize (Schnieders et al., 2021). These problems are exacerbated for first-generation college students, who frequently struggle to focus on their studies due to work and family obligations (Chavez, 2024).

Students' transition from secondary school to college is significant because it has a big impact on their future success as well as individual development. Students must now manage their respective time and make choices regarding their personal and academic lives, bringing with it a new degree of independence (Kyndt et al., 2020).

Pre-service teachers faced several challenges in their academic transition and career. According to a research study conducted by Aljafar and Fatima (2020), pre-service teachers encounter several difficulties, such as inadequate time for practice, a dearth of instructional

resources, and inappropriate settings in host schools. In a similar vein, Jarrah (2020) discovered that these educators struggled to manage classroom conduct, identify helpful mentors, and apply theoretical knowledge in actual classrooms. Additional research by Kamara (2020) and Dube (2020) revealed challenges with class delivery and assessment, inadequate assistance from host institutions, and difficulties with classroom placements for teaching practice. The transition was further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to an enormous dependence on online learning and limited face-to-face classroom experiences (Meegan et al., 2023). These results demonstrate the necessity of

Robust support networks for pre-service teachers.
Although there are existing studies on the challenges faced by pre-service teachers, limited studies are focusing on first-year pre-service teachers and their transition experiences from high school to college.

The general problem of the study is to explore the transition experiences of first-year pre-service teachers under the program Bachelor of Secondary Education at the Bataan Peninsula State University- Balanga Campus in the academic year 2024-2025.

Specifically, the researchers aimed to answer the following questions:
1. How do first-year pre-service teachers describe their emotional and psychological experiences from high school to college?
2. What narratives do first-year pre-service teachers share about their expectations and realities in their new academic environment?
3. In what ways do first-year pre-service teachers articulate their sense of academic identity as theY transition from high school students to college learners?
4. What specific experiences do first-year pre-service teachers recount that highlight the differences between high school and college learning environments?
5. How do first-year pre-service teachers express their coping mechanisms for managing the challenges associated with this transition?

This study aims to examine the challenges and journeys of first-year pre-service educators as they move from high school to college. Because it entails a significant change in academic expectations, freedom, and duties, this adjustment is significant. By attending to these

learners, the project hopes to learn what factors, such as their educational preparedness, social networks, and support systems, facilitate or impede their transition to college life. The ultimate goal of the study is to yield valuable data that will aid in the development of focused materials and assistance for incoming pre-service teachers, enhancing their academic experience and ensuring their success in the classroom.

METHODOLOGY
This study employs a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of first-year pre-service educators transitioning from high school to college. By utilizing observations, interviews, and reflective journals, researchers aim to understand students' emotions, struggles, and perspectives during this critical phase. Key themes such as social integration, academic pressure, and professional identity development are examined to enhance educator training programs and establish supportive networks. A phenomenological perspective allows researchers to identify common challenges and create strategies that facilitate a smoother adjustment process for incoming pre-service teachers, ultimately improving their preparedness for teaching careers.

The study focuses on ten first-year pre-service English teachers from the Bataan Peninsula State University- Balanga Campus, selected through purposive sampling. Data collection involved online semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, providing an in-depth exploration of participants' challenges, expectations, and coping mechanisms. Thematic analysis, conducted using MAXQDA software, helped identify significant trends and insights. Ethical considerations were prioritized, ensuring participant confidentiality and voluntary participation. While recognizing potential biases and external factors such as pandemic-related disruptions, the researchers aimed to develop recommendations for institutions to support pre-service teachers more effectively during their transition.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
Part I: Emotional and Psychological Experiences
First-year pre-service teachers experience both positive and negative emotions as they transition to college life. The most common positive emotion expressed was excitement about new experiences, meeting new people, and gaining independence. However, negative emotions such as anxiety, culture shock, pressure, sadness, and nervousness were prevalent. Anxiety stemmed from

adapting to a new environment, academic expectations, and fear of the unknown. Culture shock resulted from exposure to a larger campus, diverse personalities, and unfamiliar systems. Many students also felt pressure due to competition with highly capable classmates and the responsibility of leadership roles. Sadness was linked to social adjustments and separation from home, while nervousness was common due to unfamiliar peers and academic uncertainty. Addressing these emotional difficulties is essential to ensuring a smoother transition and better academic performance.

Interview Excerpts:

Participant 1: "On the first day of college, I can honestly say that I was excited. Because in high school, unlike in high school, there is too much competition when you get to college; people or students are more mature."

Participant 2: "Kind of nervous, exciting because... there's excitement because I know that I will meet new people and will develop through growth."

Participant 4: "Feeling of anxiousness. It limited or somehow propelled me to think to a certain degree that I need to be careful with my actions."

Part II: Expectations vs. Realities

Pre-service teachers had various expectations about university life, some of which contrasted with reality. Many anticipated a more mature academic environment but encountered peer conflicts and classroom immaturity. The transition also required significant personal adjustments, including changes in mindset and self-discipline. Academically, students struggled with increased workloads and complex schedules, which were far more demanding than in high school. The expectation of personal freedom was challenged by academic rigor, requiring students to prioritize responsibilities. Structured orientation programs can help students set realistic expectations and develop coping strategies for academic and social challenges.

Interview Excerpts:

Participant 9: "Our class had a misunderstanding. I expected that when we get to college, everyone will be mature, but there will still be conflicts among classmates."

Participant 6: "I felt too much pressure since I was the class mayor. I was supposed to make no mistakes."

Part III: Academic Identity and Learning Environment

The shift from high school to college brought notable differences in teaching methods and academic responsibilities. In high school, the teacher-centered and spoon-feeding approach allowed students to rely on their instructors. In contrast, college education follows a learner-centered model, requiring students to be proactive and independent in their studies. Pre-service teachers also observed an expansion in their knowledge and critical thinking skills but struggled with the expectation of self-directed learning. Time management, self-discipline, and a growth mindset were identified as key components of academic success. Universities should emphasize these skills to help students transition effectively from structured learning to self-guided education.

Interview Excerpts:

Participant 2: "In college, I feel like I'm not that confident with my classmates because they are really good."

Participant 4: "In my senior high school year, the teachers did all the teaching. They didn't let students report. But in college, we have to take responsibility for our learning."

Part IV: Coping Mechanisms and Stress Management

To manage academic stress, pre-service teachers utilized several coping mechanisms, including self-improvement, study skills, and time optimization. Self-improvement strategies included self-realization, prioritizing physical and mental health, and engaging in reflective practices. Study skills such as structured study habits and reading helped students manage their workload and enhance comprehension. Time optimization played a crucial role in balancing academic and personal responsibilities, with students emphasizing time management and efficiency to meet deadlines. Universities can support students by offering mentorship programs, wellness workshops, and stress management training to ensure academic success and well-being.

Interview Excerpts:

Participant 3: "I balance my academic life and my social life because I tend not to tire myself on my academics. I learn to take a break from time to time and just do the things I love."

Participant 10: "When I started college, I said to myself that I have to get ready, not only physically but also mentally, for academic, social, and personal challenges."

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. There were two emotional and psychological experiences of pre-service teachers, which are positive excitement and negative emotions, anxiousness, culture shock, pressure, sadness, and nervousness.
2. The expectations and realities of pre-service teachers include internal mindset and adjustment; external immature classmates and new environment; and academic, full schedule.
3. The academic identities of pre-service teachers as they transition from high school to college were personal skills, discipline, academic-social balance, and character, which is self-confidence.
4. The differences observed by the pre-service teachers in high school and college environments were teaching methods; teacher-centered approach, spoon-feeding, and learner-centered approach; learning experience; knowledge acquisition and independent study; and high school experience; spoiled in high school, and less stress in high school.
5. The strategies or mechanisms employed by the pre-service teachers to cope with academic stress were self-improvement, study skills, and time optimization. In the self-improvement category, self-realization and physical and mental health were noted. In study skills, study habits and reading were emphasized. Lastly, time optimization, time efficiency, and time management were pointed out.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support for mental and emotional well-being, including peer support groups and counseling services, should be offered by colleges and universities.
2. To guarantee seamless transitions for freshmen, universities should implement strict orientation and transition programs.
3. Students should be given access to digital time management tools and courses on study techniques as part of their academic skill development.
4. When developing curricula or syllabi, it is important to incorporate real-world experiences and a variety of instructional strategies.
5. Teaching and learning should include character development programs and self-reflection exercises.
6. Propose an enhanced program centering on the importance of overall being of students encouraging healthy lifestyles.

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