

Exploring the Professional Beliefs of Early Childhood Education Preservice Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Professional beliefs are foundational and dynamic constructs that shape how early childhood educators perceive their roles, make pedagogical decisions, and foster high-quality learning environments. Preservice teachers make pedagogical decisions based on deeply rooted professional beliefs. In early childhood education (ECE), these beliefs develop through a complex interplay of prior non-formal socialization, personal caregiving experiences, and formal university preparation. This study explore how ECE preservice teachers develop and articulate their professional beliefs within the context of teacher preparation. Using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological research design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight ECE preservice teachers to explore the prior experiences influencing their beliefs and their core perspectives on teaching and learning. Qualitative thematic analysis revealed that belief formation is deeply rooted in lived experiences and social roles, including informal teaching engagements such as church youth leadership, familial caregiving responsibilities, and early exposure to diverse or marginalized learners. The participants demonstrated a holistic, values-driven belief system that positions ECE as a moral and vocational commitment rather than solely technical instruction. Within this perspective, teaching is viewed as caregiving, or second mothering, emphasizing child centered, Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), community partnerships, and essential teacher dispositions such as patience, flexibility, and adaptability. Teacher education programs should build on preservice teachers' prior experiences and expose them to diverse real-world communities so that they can critically reflect on those experiences and develop those dispositions needed to become resilient teachers.

Keywords: Preservice teacher, Teacher identity, Professional beliefs, Beliefs formation, Early Childhood Education to 5 keywords separated by commas.

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Introduction

The quality of early childhood learning environments is deeply intertwined with the self-awareness, professional beliefs, and evolving identity of the educators who lead them. High-quality teaching in early childhood education (ECE) demands a dynamic combination of pedagogical skills, content knowledge, and deeply held values (Noonan, 2019). Preservice teachers enter teacher preparation programs with

foundational beliefs—encompassing assumptions about child development, diversity, literacy, and equity—that fundamentally shape how they perceive their responsibilities and make instructional decisions. These beliefs are the foundation of a teacher's professional identity, or their developing understanding of who they are as a teacher and how they see and present themselves in the educational setting (Day & Kington, 2008). As preservice teachers engage in

practical training and clinical practice, they transition from merely learning how to teach to discovering who they are as educators, constructing their identity through continuous negotiation between personal values, sociocultural contexts, and practical training experiences (Timošćuk & Ugaste, 2010).

Teacher professional beliefs are not formed in isolation during university coursework; rather, they are deeply rooted in prior socialization and lived experiences. Lortie's (1975) concept of the apprenticeship of observation posits that individuals develop persistent assumptions about teaching through early interactions and prior schooling. In early childhood contexts, this pre-professional socialization extends beyond traditional classroom observation to include informal teaching roles (e.g., church youth leadership), familial caregiving responsibilities, and early community engagement with diverse or marginalized learners (Crowe & McGarr, 2022; Fiel & Sermona, 2024; Flores, 2020). In Philippine educational setting and other Asian Countries, familial caregiving roles and community service foster beliefs that conceptualize teaching through a care-centered, moral lens, frequently viewing educators as parental surrogates or "second parents" (W. Shang, et.al 2022)

This inquiry is theoretically grounded in Kolb Experiential Learning Theory and sociocultural frameworks of identity formation (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2022; Hong et al., 2024). Kolb (1984) posits that knowledge is continuously constructed and transformed through experience paired with critical reflection. Structured reflective practice serves as the vital mechanism enabling preservice teachers to bridge the gap between initial idealistic expectations and grounded child-centered pedagogical strategies (Flores, 2020; Tran & Dang, 2022). Furthermore, contemporary early childhood literature underscores that ECE practice is fundamentally relational, requiring educators to integrate affective caregiving, moral character building, and Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) within an ecological framework of family and community partnerships (Papatheodorou, 2026;

Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Despite growing recognition of the role of professional self-concept in teacher resilience and classroom efficacy, there remains a critical need to systematically examine how preservice teachers qualitatively construct and articulate their beliefs within localized teacher preparation programs. Existing literature often examines teacher beliefs in isolation or focuses exclusively on formal instructional methods, overlooking the phenomenological process through which personal caregiving histories and moral convictions are translated into a professional identity. To address this gap, this study explored how early childhood education preservice teachers develop and articulate their professional beliefs within their teacher preparation context. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What prior experiences shape their professional beliefs;
2. What core beliefs do preservice teachers hold about teaching and learning in early childhood education;
3. What admission practices may be recommended to help Teacher Education Institutions identify applicants who demonstrate appropriate dispositions and potential for the early childhood teaching profession?

Methodology

Design:

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore how early childhood education preservice teachers develop and articulate their professional beliefs. Phenomenology is appropriate for this inquiry as it seeks to understand the essence of individuals' lived experiences and how they interpret and make meaning of a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the phenomenon of interest is the process of becoming an early childhood educator. It focuses on how preservice teachers construct their professional identity through personal experiences, social interactions, and reflective processes. The design allows for an

in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences, emphasizing both individual meaning-making and shared patterns of experience.

Participants:

The participants were early childhood education preservice teachers enrolled in a teacher preparation program in the College of Education. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who had direct experience relevant to the phenomenon and were willing to participate in in-depth interviews. A total of eight early childhood education preservice teachers were interviewed, a phenomenological qualitative studies do not rely on a strict predetermined sample size, instead sample sizes of three to ten participants are typically recommended to allow for a deep exploration of lived experiences (Creswell and Poth 2018). Thus, the guiding principle for sample size is data saturation. Saturation occurs when newly collected data becomes repetitive and yields no new themes, information or interpretations (Fusch and ness, 2015). Hence, the researcher concluded interviews when the repetitive nature of the data indicated that saturation had been achieved.

Procedure:

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a central method in phenomenological inquiry that allows participants to describe their lived experiences in rich detail. An interview guide was utilized to ensure consistency while maintaining the flexibility necessary for probing and elaboration. To ensure participants could fully articulate their experiences, all interviews were conducted in a language comfortable for them, audio-recorded with explicit consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. This rigorous approach ensured the accurate capture of the participants' authentic voices and meanings. The data were analyzed using [8] phenomenological method, a rigorous and systematic approach designed to extract, organize, and interpret meanings from the participants' narratives. The following steps were executed:

All interview transcripts were read multiple times to immerse the researcher in the data and gain a comprehensive understanding of the preservice

teachers' lived experiences.

Key statements and phrases directly related to the phenomenon were extracted from the transcripts. These statements specifically captured the participants' experiences in developing their professional beliefs and identity as early childhood educators.

Meanings were derived from these significant statements through careful interpretation. Each statement was analyzed to uncover its underlying meaning while remaining strictly grounded in the participants' original accounts.

The formulated meanings were grouped into thematic clusters. These clusters were subsequently organized into broader categories and overarching themes representing shared patterns across all participants.

A comprehensive description of the phenomenon was constructed by integrating all identified themes. This narrative captures the full scope and richness of the preservice teachers' lived experiences.

The exhaustive description was refined to distill the essential structure of the phenomenon. This step highlighted the core essence of how these preservice teachers develop and articulate their professional beliefs and pedagogical identity.

Finally, the findings were shared with the participants to validate that the fundamental structure accurately reflected their experiences, ensuring the trustworthiness and credibility.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The study adhered to established criteria for qualitative trustworthiness to ensure the rigor and integrity of the findings. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement with the interview transcripts and the execution of member checking. The synthesized exhaustive descriptions and core thematic structures were returned to the eight preservice teachers to validate that the findings accurately reflected their authentic lived experience. Dependability was ensured by employing a systematic and transparent data analysis process, as such, a detailed audit trail documenting every stage of data transformation from raw audio recordings to verbatim transcriptions, significant statement extraction, formulated meanings, and final thematic clusters.

Confirmability was maintained by grounding all interpretations in participants' narratives, thereby minimizing researcher bias. Finally, transferability was supported by providing rich, thick contextual descriptions of the teacher preparation program, participant selection criteria, and verbatim qualitative extracts. This enables future researchers to evaluate the applicability of these phenomenological findings to similar early childhood teacher education contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their rights, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the option to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was secured before conducting interviews. Pseudonyms were used and all identifiable information was removed from the transcripts and reports to ensure confidentiality and data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

Results And Discussions

This presents the findings of the study on how early childhood education preservice teachers develop and articulate their professional beliefs. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in two major domains: (1) prior experiences shaping professional beliefs, (2) core beliefs about teaching and learning

1.1. Prior experiences that shape the preservice teachers professional beliefs

The preservice teachers' professional beliefs are primarily shaped by their lived experiences and the social roles assumed prior to university education. Their narratives demonstrate that early teaching-related experiences in informal contexts, such as Sunday school and church youth leadership provided initial exposure to pedagogical leadership. These accounts suggest that participants enacted teaching roles before formal training, which contributed to the early development of beliefs about teaching as a relational and service-oriented practice. These experiences function as pre-professional socialization, shaping the participants'

perceptions of the teaching role. Family caregiving, particularly caring for a sibling with disabilities, provided participants with direct insight into children's needs, behaviors, and developmental sensitivities. Such experiences contributed to the formation of beliefs emphasizing patience, responsibility, and nurturing, which are regarded as essential qualities in early childhood education. The findings indicate that preservice teachers often conceptualize teaching as an extension of caregiving, this is reinforced in the study of Hong et al., (2022); Vera et al., (2026) emphasizing that early childhood teaching is fundamentally relational and affective.

In addition to family caregiving, community involvement particularly exposure to diverse and marginalized learners serves as a formative experience that establishes a foundation for preservice teachers' understanding of teaching, learning, and pedagogical leadership. This exposure significantly influences their beliefs about teaching as a means to promote inclusivity and address the varied needs of learners. Research demonstrates that preservice teachers who engage with marginalized communities develop stronger commitments to social justice and inclusive education (Nguyen, 2021). By expressing a desire to support and advocate for vulnerable children, participants reveal that their emerging professional beliefs are informed by both experience and ethical considerations. This finding is consistent with recent research highlighting the importance of exposure to diversity in developing inclusive and equity-oriented teaching beliefs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Additionally, these results support sociocultural theories, which maintain that learning and meaning-making are shaped through participation in social practices and roles (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Collectively, the literature confirms that sustained exposure to familial caregiving and community-based experiences leads preservice teachers to approach their future pedagogical responsibilities with a moral, parent-like, and care-centered perspective (Syaripudin & Apandi, 2022).

A further significant aspect of this theme is the

role of reflection in transforming experiences into professional beliefs. Participants not only recounted their experiences but also sought to understand individual behavior in greater depth. This indicates the development of a reflective and inquiry-oriented mindset, where experiences are critically analyzed to extract meaning. Consequently, participants move beyond passive experience to the construction of informed beliefs about teaching and learning. This process is consistent with experiential learning theory, which asserts that knowledge is generated through the transformation of experience via reflection (Kolb, 1984). Recent studies similarly emphasize that reflective practice is essential to teacher development, enabling preservice teachers to critically examine their assumptions and refine their beliefs (Flores, 2020).

1.2. Core beliefs of preservice teachers hold about teaching and learning in early childhood education

The results show that early childhood education (ECE) preservice teachers develop a holistic, values-oriented understanding of teaching. Participants characterized ECE as a relational, ethical, and multidimensional practice dedicated to nurturing the whole child within interconnected family and community systems. They consistently described teaching young children as both a moral imperative and a spiritual calling. As one preservice teacher stated, "the early childhood profession is really a mission and a vocation because you were sent with a purpose, and that purpose is to make those children become human, to nurture their minds and touch their hearts." This perspective reflects strong intrinsic motivation, with a commitment to children's development prioritized over external challenges such as heavy workloads or limited compensation. In the Philippine sociocultural context, teaching is widely regarded as a noble profession grounded in service and nation-building. Garcia and Flores (2023), observed that Filipino preservice teachers anchor their professional beliefs in cultural values of service, faith, and ethical responsibility. Similarly, Kim and Cho (2022) found that perceiving teaching as a "calling" supports teacher commitment, resilience, and self-efficacy during the initial years of practice.

It is further reported by Liu et al. (2024) that preservice educators who adopt an intrinsic, vocational orientation demonstrate stronger professional retention and greater ethical advocacy for young learners.

While recognizing teaching as a calling, participants pointed out the relational dimension of the profession by describing early childhood educators as emotional anchors and parental surrogates. The metaphor of the teacher as a "second mother" was frequently cited during interviews. Preservice teachers prioritized emotional security, love, and empathy, maintaining that cognitive development depends on a foundation of trust and meaningful relationships. Benoit et al. (2025) emphasized that early learning environments are fundamentally relational, arguing that emotional caregiving forms an essential pedagogical framework supporting brain development and socio-emotional regulation.

Participants recognized that the responsibilities of early childhood educators go beyond classroom instruction. They described the teacher's role as multifaceted, including functions such as counsellor, guide, advocate, and community liaison. High-quality early childhood practice requires collaboration with families and community networks to promote equity, child safety, and holistic well-being. This comprehensive perspective is consistent Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Theory (1981) emphasizing the interconnected influences of family, school, and community on child development. Thus, preservice teacher preparation should equip future educators to navigate complex family and community ecosystems.

Additionally, participants showed a strong commitment to child-centered pedagogy, recognizing early childhood as a particularly sensitive developmental stage. They asserted that instruction should accommodate diverse learning styles, employ positive reinforcement, and respect each child's individual developmental pace. These perspectives are consistent to Han, C., & Lei, J. (2025) that preservice teachers who prioritize differentiated instruction and Universal

Design for Learning (UDL) principles foster more inclusive, responsive, and supportive early childhood classrooms.

Participants emphasized that effective early childhood teaching requires not only pedagogical knowledge but also essential personal dispositions. In particular, they identified patience, adaptability, resourcefulness, and a commitment to lifelong learning as critical qualities. These qualities, in turn, enable teachers to respond effectively to the diverse and evolving needs of young children while continuously improving their professional practice. Consistent with this finding, Day & Kington (2008) highlighted resourcefulness and pedagogical responsiveness as vital competencies for preservice teachers. Similarly, Flores & Day (2005) demonstrated that fostering reflective flexibility and a commitment to continuous learning enables preservice teachers to bridge the gap between theoretical preparation and classroom realities.

All these findings indicate that preservice teachers conceptualize early childhood education as a profession grounded in service, care, collaboration, inclusivity, and ongoing professional development. Moreover, their perspectives reflect an integrated understanding of teaching that encompasses moral purpose, relational commitment, child-centered pedagogy, ecological partnerships, and reflective practice. Thus, professional identity formation in early childhood education emerges as a multidimensional process in which personal dispositions, professional competencies, relational values, and continuous reflection collectively shape how preservice teachers understand and enact their roles as future educators.

Conclusion

The study established that the development of professional beliefs among early childhood education (ECE) preservice teachers is a dynamic, experientially grounded, and reflective process. These formative experiences contribute to preservice teachers' understanding of early childhood teaching as an affective and relational extension of caregiving, wherein the teacher's role

encompasses not only facilitating learning as well as attending to children's emotional, social, and developmental needs. Direct involvement with diverse and marginalized learners broadens their pedagogical perspectives by exposing them to issues of inequality, vulnerability, and individual differences. Such encounters promote a strong sense of moral responsibility and strengthen their commitment to inclusivity, equity, and child advocacy. Through critical self-reflection, preservice teachers reconstruct and make meaning of these experiences, transforming personal and social encounters into a more coherent and inquiry-oriented set of professional beliefs.

Moreover, preservice teachers conceptualize early childhood education as holistic, relational, and value-driven, extending beyond the delivery of knowledge to encompass the development of the whole child. They regard teaching as a moral vocation and, for some, as a spiritual mission sustained by intrinsic motivation, dedication, and resilience despite challenging workloads and limited financial compensation. Within this perspective, relational care and affective pedagogy occupy a central position. Preservice teachers recognize that early childhood teachers assume various interrelated roles, including those of teacher, caregiver, counselor, advocate, and community liaison, requiring meaningful partnerships with families and community networks. Their pedagogical beliefs are further grounded in child-centered and developmentally responsive approaches, particularly Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). These perspectives reflect their recognition that children differ in their developmental trajectories, learning needs, interests, strengths, and ways of engaging with learning experiences. Consequently, effective teaching is perceived not as the application of a single instructional approach but as an adaptive process that responds to individual children and their contexts. Preservice teachers identify patience, adaptability, resourcefulness, empathy, and commitment to lifelong learning as essential professional dispositions that enable educators to respond effectively to classroom complexities. In general, the findings underscore the

importance of recognizing preservice teachers as active meaning-makers, whose personal histories and lived experiences significantly influence their development as future educators.

Implications

The findings of this study offer several important implications for teacher education programs, particularly in early childhood education:

1. Integration of experiential learning

Teacher education programs should intentionally integrate and scaffold preservice teachers' prior experiences by connecting them with formal pedagogical knowledge. Recognizing these experiences as legitimate sources of learning can strengthen belief formation and identity development.

2. Strengthening reflective practice

Structured and sustained reflective activities (e.g., journals, guided reflections, portfolio assessments) should be embedded across the program to support preservice teachers in critically examining their experiences and beliefs.

3. Emphasis on relational and affective competence

Programs should highlight the importance of care, empathy, and relationship-building as core competencies in early childhood education, not merely as personal traits but as professional practices.

4. Promotion of inclusive and context-responsive teaching

Exposure to diverse learners and communities should be expanded through field experiences and community engagement to develop preservice teachers' commitment to equity and inclusion.

5. Support for identity formation

Teacher education institutions should provide mentoring, coaching, and reflective spaces that support preservice teachers in constructing and negotiating their professional identity.

VI. Recommendations

Based on the findings and implications, the following recommendations are proposed: For Teacher Education Institutions

Design curricula that explicitly connect lived experiences with theoretical frameworks, allowing preservice teachers to contextualize their beliefs.

Incorporate reflective and narrative-based pedagogies (e.g., storytelling, identity mapping) to deepen self-awareness and professional growth.

Strengthen field-based and practicum experiences, ensuring exposure to diverse and inclusive educational settings.

Provide mentoring programs involving cooperating teachers and faculty to guide identity development.

For Faculty and Teacher Educators

Facilitate dialogic and reflective discussions that encourage preservice teachers to articulate and critically examine their beliefs.

Recognize and validate preservice teachers' cultural, familial, and community-based experiences as assets in their professional development.

Model learner-centered and reflective teaching practices, reinforcing alignment between theory and

practice.

For Future Researchers

Conduct longitudinal studies to examine how preservice teachers' beliefs and identities evolve from pre-service to in-service teaching.

Explore the role of mentoring, institutional culture, and policy contexts in shaping teacher identity.

Investigate similar phenomena across different regions in the Philippines or ASEAN to provide comparative insights.

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