
Through the Pandemic: Experiences of Early Childhood Education Pre-Service Teachers' Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

The practicum experience for early childhood education preservice teachers is the stage where they can have hands-on experience handling learners and applying all the pedagogical knowledge and skills they have learned. This qualitative study, most specifically, the transcendental phenomenology research design, was utilized to explore the experiences of five early childhood education pre-service teachers during the new normal. The evaluative criteria for trustworthiness, such as dependability, confirmability, transferability, and credibility, were established using careful adherence to protocols and processes. Findings reveal two emerging themes: self-determination and trepidation of the pandemic. The participants described their self-determination as an exercise of their autonomy, competence, relatedness, and social engagement. On the other hand, they characterize the trepidation of the pandemic with fear, anxiety, uncertainty, loss of motivation, sudden change of learning environment, challenging behaviors online, struggles, and lack of resources. The study further concludes that the pre-service teachers' desire to learn kept them motivated to keep teaching. Seminars to improve teachers' adaptability and resilience are suggested for university administrators and teaching staff, as well as the use of technology-based training to handle online teaching. Future studies can take into account an inquiry into successful coping techniques to find techniques utilized by students to manage and navigate a pandemic while achieving their academic goals.

KEYWORDS: *early childhood education, practicum teaching, new normal, transcendental phenomenology*

INTRODUCTION

The start of COVID-19 pandemic has created the drastic change in the educational systems in human history that brought closures of schools, institutions, and other learning spaces that have impacted more than 94% of the world's student population (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) even proposed health protocols (Karademir, Yaman & Saatçioğlu, 2020) and all educational institutions were mandated to seize instruction for social distancing (Bakker & Wagner, 2020; Yue et al., 2020). Above all, it created new things to consider for the academe such as online learning as a form of distance education (Kim, 2020; Dhawan, 2020). All schools be it in basic education or higher education institutions have resorted to flexible learning in distance education. Due to the growing popularity of online learning, the utilization of various learning management systems from all schools has come to its choices (Wallace, 2018). In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) promulgated the guidelines on Flexible Learning (FL) to all public and private

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). To this effect, the state university where the researcher is teaching follows the said mandate. Specifically, students under the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECED) Program have been recipients of this flexible learning since the start of the pandemic in the year 2020 until 2022. The Early Childhood Education Program is based on fundamental facts about human development. It highlights children's quality of life and their contributions to society as individuals and later as adults. Thus, education teachers play an intermediary role in online environments to further assess the practices of their students while learning online. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Early Childhood Education pre-service teachers during their new normal practicum experience. Common themes were extracted through this major research question in this study: *What are the experiences of Early Childhood Education pre-service teachers during the new normal?*

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study assumes that the pre-service teachers taking Bachelor of Early Childhood Education experience some challenges and concerns during their practicum teaching. This assumption is anchored on Self-Regulated Learning by Zimmerman (1986), Experiential Learning by Dewey (1938), Phenomenology by Husserl (1962), and Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (1985; 2012). These four theories provide a framework through which the researcher made sense of the experiences of the early childhood education practicum teachers involved in this study.

Zimmerman (1986), in his theory of Self-Regulated Learning, surmised that within any learning experience, individuals use unique steps of self-regulation processes. One of the challenges of online learning is the reported increased need for self-regulation in the more self-directed environment (Artino & Stephens, 2009). As a part of this process, students must regulate cognition, motivation/affect, behavior, and context (Pintrich, 2004). The areas of self-regulation include such self-regulatory processes as goal setting, planning, self-monitoring, effort expenditure, help-seeking, persistence, evaluation of tasks, and context. Self-regulation can be perplexed by the nature of the majority of online students who have competing demands on their time such as jobs and families, which can potentially interfere with their ability to perform various self-regulatory processes (Artino & Stephens, 2009). As an end product of these factors, and the more independent nature of online learning, there is generally a greater need for self-regulation online.

Another theory on which this study is anchored is Dewey's Experiential Learning. Dewey (1938 cited by Miettinen, 2000) proposed a carefully developed theory of experience and its relation to education. It involves both continuity and interaction between learners and what they learned. Dewey's principle of continuity states that all experiences are carried forward and influence future experiences and decisions. Dewey's principle of interaction refers to the objective and internal conditions of an experience. Experiential learning is based on the idea that having experiences is the best way to learn (Dewey, 1938; Kolb & Kolb, 2012). Such experiences become imprinted in the mind, assisting one to retain information and remember facts. The four main concepts of the theory are experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting on an experience that is relevant in exploring the opportunities and challenges experienced by the BECED student-teachers. The cycle begins with student-teachers experiencing something new which is doing their internship through flexible learning modality. After having their

internship experience, student-teachers needs to have a thorough reflection before moving on to the next stage, where they can consider possible ways to accommodate such experience. Following the opportunity to reflect and think, pre-service teachers can translate their thoughts into actions to which it can result to the construction of learning new experiences, prompting them to repeat the process.

The nature of this study is phenomenology which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century (Davison, 2013). While a variety of philosophers have advanced and developed this, most types of phenomenology draw principally from the work of two people, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger. Phenomenological inquiry assists the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences (Patton, 2015). In addition, as cited by Davison (2013), a phenomenological study identifies the meaning of the lived experience of individuals related to a specific phenomenon and then develops a composite description of the phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2007) that eliminates everything that represents a prejudgment or presupposition (Moustakas, 1994). The challenge lies in describing things as how they are to understand the meanings and essences to give clairvoyance to the phenomenon and lead to self-reflection. This provided the foundation for exploring the experiences of Early Childhood Education practicum teachers who have shared a common experience during their practicum teaching. It primarily draws to examine their responses, reactions, feelings, challenges, or growth that may have emerged in their online learning. Patton (2015) suggests that to utilize phenomenology as design for research, a researcher needs to have a personal interest in the study and an established connection with participants to assist is deemed imperative to create a rich environment for the descriptions of the phenomenon being investigated.

Self-determination is another theory to be benchmarked in this study that was projected by Deci and Ryan (1985). It is a macro-level theory of human motivation where it intends to explicate the forces at work of human need, motivation, and well-being within a social context. It suggests that students' motivational orientation to progress from an extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation is enabled by supporting the three universal needs that all individuals possess. These are autonomy (feeling self-governed and self-endorsed), competence (feeling competent and effective), and relatedness (feeling connected, loved, interacted). All these inspire learners to be engaged in the learning process especially when pedagogical design appropriately satisfies their psychological needs (Chui, 2022).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although teachers during this new normal are likely to put into use their ICT skills in teaching as well as in their professional development, research on early childhood education pre-service teachers' online academic learning has not been able to keep up with this trend. Since early childhood education teachers play an intermediary role in online environments, the research gap on how their attitudes and methods in using online academic learning can affect their pre-service teaching is still uncertain (Kim, 2020). Hence, this study aimed to have an in-depth understanding and description of the Early Childhood Education Pre-service Teachers' experiences in the new normal.

METHODS

This study will be based on qualitative research design, specifically, transcendental phenomenology as an approach to inquiry. As described by Moustakas (1994), the phenomenon is named transcendental because the experience is something new in the perspective of the researcher. The latter tries to describe in detail the early childhood education student teachers lived experiences during their new normal practicum experience in a state university in the Province of Bukidnon. Purposive sampling of five (5) preservice teachers who met the set of criteria were obtained and in – depth interviews were done to all participants in order to obtain precise and meaningful data about the phenomenon under investigation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After careful analysis of the interview transcripts, themes and categories were identified, namely 1) self-determination (autonomy, competence, relatedness, and social engagement); and 2) trepidation about the pandemic (fear, anxiety and uncertainty, losing motivation, sudden change of learning environment, challenging behaviors online, struggles, and lack of resources).

	Theme 1: Self-determination	Theme 2: Trepidation of Pandemic
Results	<i>Autonomy Competence Relatedness Social engagement</i>	<i>Fear, anxiety and uncertainty Loss of motivation Sudden change of learning environment Challenging behaviors online Struggles Lack of resources</i>

THEME 1: SELF-DETERMINATION

The narrative of the participants revealed their experience of being a student-teacher during the pandemic. All of them are determined to finish their practicum experience despite the hurdles of life that they have gone through caused by the pandemic. The transcript of their interviews showed the four categories that defined self-determination. These categories are autonomy, competence, relatedness and social engagement. For the participants, pre-service teachers can only be self-determined if they possess autonomy or independence, if they have the competence necessary for teaching, if they know how to relate to other teachers as well as to the students and to maintain their social engagement through constant communication with their classmates and instructors. Self-determination is also a theory that was projected by Deci and Ryan (1985) and cited by Chiu (2022). It is a macro-level theory of human

motivation wherein its intentions are to explicate the forces at work of human need, motivation, and well-being within a social context. It suggests that students 'motivational orientation to progress from an extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation is enabled by supporting the three universal needs which are autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Category 1: Autonomy

The narrative of the participants revealed that they possess autonomy or independence. The distance education caused them to be independent in terms of their own learning. They taught tried to motivate their selves to push through with their tasks at hand. In order to survive it, they became health conscious all because health is wealth for the them. Though the distance made them feel like they are the only ones responsible for their own education and learning, so they conditioned and motivated their own selves. Accepting the process of the drastic change in the educational setting was one of their leaps in order to overcome the difficulties they faced. Their drive for teaching was even kept aflame and that made them survive the whole duration of their practicum experience.

In the research of Deci and Ryan (1985) and cited by Chiu (2022), the need for autonomy is the desire to feel in charge of our own actions and objectives. It is the feeling of having choices and is willingly endorsing one's behavior. The participants need to feel in control of their own behaviors and goals. They feel more driven and self-determined to complete their responsibilities despite the distance learning since they can take immediate action that will lead to genuine change (Very Well Mind, 2022). Rewards and other extrinsic influences occasionally reduce self-determination and this has been gone in the midst of distance learning. Giving people extrinsic rewards for actions that are organically driven might damage autonomy, according to Deci & Ryan (1985). People start to feel less in control of their behavior, and internal drive decreases, as behavior is increasingly influenced by external rewards. With the academic set up cause by the pandemic, the preservice teachers were able to hone their autonomy in terms of their self-determination.

Category 2: Competence

The narrative of the participants, it revealed that they possess competence or being master and effective in a task or activity. Though they undergone independence all throughout their practicum journey, it made them competent somehow by becoming ready and taking their internship seriously. The participants even shared that they tried teaching strategies that they never experienced before such as the use of interactive PowerPoint presentations and even how to use the online platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom Cloud. As much as they can, they really take risks for their learning by being productive despite the distance.

Furthermore, two of the participants shared their experience of using productivity tools. In the research of Ismail (2020), productivity tools have a positive purpose in our daily lives, both at home and at work. Although there are many advantages, the best justification is that it improves the effectiveness of basic, everyday tasks. The preservice teachers used checklist and to-do-list in order to be keep of track in their daily activities and can measure their performance whether they've completed, yet completed, and thus the number of tasks completed (Wang & Lee, 2022). The pre-service teachers were able to use these tools in fulfilling their preservice teaching tasks.

This is also found to be effective according to de Bruin, et al. (2020) wherein, learners must improve monitoring precision by, for example, asking them to come up with list of things to do in order for them to be engaged in doing their work. (De Bruin et al. 2011; Waldeyer and Roelle, 2020). Because learners do not have to keep all of the things to be done in working memory while assessing their degree of learning, the information processing load is probably lowered. Furthermore, Nückles et al. (2009) and Roelle et al. (2020) stated that in learning to have the checklist, learners are pushed to write down their monitoring judgments, which presumably frees cognitive capacity for further regulation.

In overall with competence, this refers to the experience of mastery and being effective in one's activity. The need to feel capable, effective, and challenged that is referred to as competence (Chui 2022; Ryan & Deci 1985). The participants gained mastery of tasks and learned different skills during the distance learning. According to Deci & Ryan (1985), when people feel that they have the skills needed for success, they are more likely to take actions that will help them achieve their goals especially to be productive in their practicum experience.

Category 3: Relatedness

The narrative of the participants, it revealed that they possess relatedness or connection. Despite the present issue of social and physical distancing during the pandemic, the participants find means and ways just to be retain their connection with their friends, classmates, family and even instructors. They felt pity towards their classmates whom they also cherish as their friends since some of them doesn't have the finances to get by with their practicum journey. Some of them even made their selves strong not just for their own but for their family, friends and classmates, too in order to assist each other all throughout the pandemic times.

The third universal need according to Deci and Ryan (1985) and cited by Chiu (2022) is relatedness. This is also called connection (Very Well Mind, 2022). It refers to feeling connected, loved, and interacted. People need to experience a sense of belonging and attachment to and with other people. Researchers contend that our predisposition to be either proactive or passive is significantly impacted by the social circumstances of our upbringing (Very Well Mind, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 1985). Social support is very important for it has the power to promote or obstruct wellbeing and personal development through our interactions and connections with others.

Category 4: Social Engagement

The narrative of the participants, it revealed that they maintained their social engagement all throughout the course of their practicum experience towards their classmates and instructors. Some of them unloaded their selves in terms of their social engagement because of personal reasons. They stopped responding to chats and they literally stopped their social engagement due to the reason that they weren't well-adjusted to the new normal set up yet. However, as part of their self-determination, they bounce back and started reaching out to the people in the academe; their classmates and instructors. During the practicum journey of the participants, communication really played the biggest role and this was done through being social engaged through social media and other communication platforms. In the course of the practicum, the preservice teachers stayed connected with their co-preservice teachers and instructors by constant interaction and participation in their preservice teaching journey.

Social engagement is a multidimensional relational concept in the sense that it features the connection, interaction, participation and involvement of a person in order to achieve an outcome (Johnston & Taylor, 2018; 1965). It can be accomplished by inspiring autonomy and learning among the teachers, and by being involved interpersonally (Chui, 2020; Hartnett, 2015). During the pandemic times, social media played an integral role in terms of our social engagement and the way we communicate has dramatically changed. When we say social media, it describes as an interactive computer-mediated tools that promote the development or exchange of information, ideas, career interests and other kinds of expression via virtual groups and networks (Wong et al., 2020). According to Kushner (2022), all individuals across the globe used social media to stay connected despite being physically separated. With the latter, some of the participants used it to send messages to their instructors in order to maintain social connections as well.

In same research of Wong et. al (2020), all the adaptations done through the pandemic times were heavily reliant on social media. Therefore, it should be applauded for their near seamless integration into the way in which we work and learn in times of pandemic, this paradigm shift comes with important caveats. A research conducted by Lima (2020), we are not only learning the latest news but also using platforms like Facebook and Twitter to provide personal and business updates. With the advent of social media in the 21st century, it is really productive and essential during the course of the pandemic.

THEME 2: TREPIDATION OF PANDEMIC

The narratives of the participants revealed that they had undergone a lot of trepidation during their new normal experience. It was indicated that some hurdles and setbacks happened during those dire times. There were negative feelings that emerged; feeling unmotivated and even frustrations. The transcript of their interviews showed the six categories that exhibit their trepidation about the pandemic. These categories are fear, anxiety and uncertainty, losing motivation, sudden change of learning environment, handling challenging behaviors online, struggles, and lack of resources.

For the participants, the COVID-19 pandemic somehow defeated them emotionally. The COVID-19 pandemic is a painstaking example of a natural disaster with so much worldwide health burden (Salehi et al., 2020). Every aspect of daily life, including how people work, live, shop, interact with one another, make plans, and even education has been dramatically and quickly impacted (Lee et al., 2020). Also, social isolation limits communication with loved ones, friends, and others makes people more prone to recurring episodes of dread, anxiety, and sadness.

Category 1: Fear, anxiety and uncertainty

The narrative of the participants revealed that their experience during their practicum was a dismal journey. There were hurdles that they have underwent which caused them to have fear, anxiety, and uncertainties in terms of their practicum experiences. They doubted their selves which led them to feel alone in their journey. After their practicum experience, they still lacked the confidence to teach all because the journey was a little less than what they expected from the very start of their academic life at the university. Uncertainty around the coronavirus is among the most challenging aspects that caused them to doubt themselves.

Most of the participants refer to their emotional response to something that appears harmful as being in fear. However, the word "fear" is also used to describe something that a person frequently feels fearful of. When something or someone makes them feel unsafe or uncertain, people become afraid (Steimer, 2020). On the other note, a sensation of worry, dread, and unease is known as anxiety. A person can start to perspire, become agitated and anxious, and experience a rapid heartbeat (Lee et. al., 2020). Nevertheless, this can be a typical stress response as it can be felt from things, people, places, and/or new situations. The new normal set up for the pre-service teachers is a whole new situation that they tried to adopt and live.

Category 2: Loosing Motivation

The motivation of students is key to academic success, but unprecedented events such as the pause for face-to-face setup in the academe caused students to lose their motivation. The narratives of the participants revealed that they felt frustrated by the turn of events, as they had their own goals of having their internship abroad. However, due to pandemic restrictions, they were unable to achieve their goals.

These narratives align to the findings of Kee (2020) where it was revealed that it is challenging to match the physical interaction of in-person classroom learning with virtual learning. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a disruption in information delivery, leading to a lack of in-person encounters and peer exchanges. This disrupted students' group projects, interactive projects, and conversations, making it difficult to adjust to the new modes (World Bank, 2020). Most of the participants felt unmotivated to do their assigned activities and even felt frustrated.

Category 3: Sudden change in the learning environment

The narratives of the participants showed that responding to sudden change, especially the transition they underwent was daunting and challenging. They did not have any idea as to how they could teach in a virtual setup since all that was taught to them was in a physical context. The use of Google Meet was a whole new thing since the onset of distance learning, they are going to join only as a student but during their practicum experience, they are now teachers. They had the feeling of being experimented on again since they were the first batch who underwent the pandemic setting for practicum experience. Even balancing their personal lives and their practicum teaching experience was a transition they had no power and control of.

According to Ferren (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a lot of stress for pre-service teachers, with no advance notice, unprepared training, and little support. Work-life balance was difficult, as many students spent their time at home, adjusting to the challenges, and managing the school in the same space. Pre-service teachers are forced to accept reality and make accommodations due to their loss of control and power over the changes in the educational procedures brought about by the pandemic.

Category 4: Challenging Behaviors Online

Handling challenging behaviors has been a major concern for teachers (Browne, 2013). The narratives of the participants showed that they had difficulty handling their learners in a virtual setting. It was a new setup that they were not taught in their subjects during their undergraduate level. The strategies they knew were not sufficient for their online learning environment needs. Since they are handling early childhood learners, they have to ensure to

address their learners' short attention spans. Hence, in order for the pre-service teachers to capture their learners' interest, their educational materials, classroom management techniques, and even the methodologies to be employed, must be engaging and suitable.

Managing student behaviors in virtual learning is also a challenge that was experienced by the participants. According to Cabero as cited by Garzon Artacho et al. (2020), teachers in the 21st century must have an overview of the skills that can guide their learners through technology-enhanced learning processes. In the study of Korucu-Kıř (2021), practicum constitutes a key element of teacher preparation. As the process of learning to teach culminates in field placements, it is also viewed as the most influential experience for pre-service teachers. Practicum is also the time wherein the pre-service teachers would "get to know the real world of schools and classrooms and what it means to interact with students, their problems and challenges" (Korucu-Kıř, 2021). Therefore, it is important to draw educators' attention to these issues about how to provide safe and healthy online environments which are appropriate for children, to develop their thinking skills and understanding of technologies for learning in the 21st century (Edwards et al., 2018; Kim, 2020; Manches & Plowman, 2017).

Category 5: Struggles

Struggles come for the pre-service teachers in terms of uncontrollable situations. The narratives of the participants showed that they experienced it during their new normal practicum experience. They mentioned that battling with power interruption is a struggle in their practicum journey. Distance education made the learning environment to be home-based. The participants felt unsatisfied with their performance due to having multiple responsibilities at home that caused them to perform less in their academic endeavors. In the province of Bukidnon, there were times of unannounced power interruptions on any day of the week. And with that, the participants did not have any control over it. Since distance education heavily relied on the internet during the pandemic times, it was even a struggle for the participants as not all of them have good internet connectivity. Most of them live in places with intermittent connections due to their geographical location. Even the transition from the old to the new normal setup was a challenge for them. The creation of instructional materials was one of the challenges in this so-called transition. From creating tangible instructional materials, they were forced to create one that is ICT-based.

This finding is in line with the research of Artacho et al. (2020) who said that Information Communications Technologies (ICTs) are ingrained in education as their use is increasingly necessary for job entry and advancement, for developing personal agency, and for promoting the exercise of active citizenship. Some researchers and educators believe that the use of ICTs in preschool education is necessary and that it can support both teachers' and children's' development (Kim, 2020). The study by Kee (2021) even attested that the pandemic obligated pre-service teachers to learn how to interact and learn virtually. Other pre-service teachers added that learning new ways to engage was a challenge.

Category 6: Lack of Resources

Lack of resources is when students don't have all the materials that they need during their practicum teaching (Ulla, 2016). The participants revealed that the resources they needed during the practicum journey were scarce. The online practicum journey required internet and laptops. It was needed since their demonstrations would happen on an online platform.

However, not all pre-service teachers had them. As much as their family would want to provide them with the needed resources, they did not have enough to buy the necessary things during the pandemic. Pre-service teachers were forced to teach their learners various subjects without the proper resources in their virtual classrooms.

Resources such as internet accessibility, laptop, and financial aspect to sustain their virtual practicum experience are costly but needed. Research in the Philippines confirmed that lack of resources in education amidst the COVID-19 pandemic leads to extreme distress for teachers and college students. In addition to being in distress, the students and teachers lack the necessary resources, which prevents them from learning to their best potential (Maffea, 2020). It affects their performance in their education. However, these did not hinder the pre-service teachers to finish their practicum journey. They found means and ways just to cope with all their stories and experiences of struggles.

FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE

The participants' self-determination and trepidation of the COVID-19 pandemic enabled the new normal practicum experience. The participants maintained their passion for studying despite the challenges of financial instability, power shortages, erratic connectivity, and a lack of resources in achieving their desired degree in early childhood education. These experiences would be meaningless without the pre-service teachers' desire to learn.

CONCLUSION

Pre-service teachers were able to continue their teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic due to their drive to learn. They regulated their selves to be resilient and adaptable to change, which was necessary since they were more in a self-directed learning environment at home and not able to report physically to school.

In a nutshell, early childhood pre-service teachers' new normal practicum experience opened up new learning opportunities while also orienting them toward a futuristic view of the educational teaching-learning process. They surmounted obstacles by keeping their desire to study. Their educational expertise from the pre-pandemic time served as their base and standard during their practical experience. This opened the door for online education, which helped them land their desired job.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researcher would like to express her deepest appreciation to the following who made this endeavor possible:

-to the *Gracious and Almighty Father* for the heavenly wisdom, divine strength, and eternal guidance, which enabled the completion of this intellectual undertaking;

-to the *panel of experts and the adviser*, for their invaluable guidance, unwavering encouragement, and insightful feedback that greatly enriched this work;

-to the researcher's parents, *Katherine and Edgar*, and siblings, *Kevin Michael and Kate Margarete*, for the unceasing love, support in all aspects, and encouragement to pursue the conduct of this journey;

-to the spouse of the researcher, *Kris Burjn*, for the consistent affection, motivation, and enormous patience of staying up during late-night revisions all for the fulfillment of this endeavor

-to the researcher's dearest children, *Xhean Pasqual and Xhzyn Kyrie*, who set as the inspiration and reason for all the hard work and perseverance to make this endeavor possible;

-to the *participants of this study*, for sharing their time and lived experiences with the researcher and their openness to take part in the study greatly aided the researcher in carrying out this intellectual venture;

-to the *graduate school staff*, for the assistance extended to the researcher since the beginning of her master's education in Childhood Education in the institution; and

-to the *colleagues, friends, and relatives*, for the belief, prayers, and help they afforded that kept the spirit and motivation of the researcher high during this process.