Lived experiences of senior high school focal persons in the implementation of work immersion program

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Abstract

Work immersion is one of the hallmarks of the Senior High School (SHS) curriculum aimed to instill work ethics, relevant skills, and values essential for succeeding in real-world environments. This study explored the lived experiences of SHS focal persons implementing Work Immersion Program (WIP). It utilized phenomenological research design. With the help of an interview guide, the researcher gathered data from the purposively selected participants: six for in-depth interview and six for focus group discussion. Using the inductive thematic analysis, one category of theme was generated: program limitations and concerns as characterized by the following experiences: troubled finding industry partners, stressed due to overlapping schedules, feeling constrained due to inaccessibility of program resources, and overwhelmed by safety and security issues. The participants shared that they employ proactive actions as coping mechanism such as: establishing relationships with stakeholders, crafting training matrix and program continuity plan, organizing a skills training and institutional assessment, and communicating WIP guidelines and policies. Moreover, the insights drawn from SHS focal persons' experiences in implementing WIP recommends paying attention to the program priorities such as including WIP to school planning, to appreciate the significance of program evaluation and monitoring; adapting best practices through benchmarking; and valuing the importance of setting up memorandum of agreement. Revisiting the program can be significant and beneficial to the learners and the implementers for sustainability and development of this program.

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1. Introduction

Work immersion is one of the hallmarks of the Senior High School (SHS) curriculum, as outlined in DepEd Order No. 30, s. 2017. It aims to instill work ethics, relevant skills, and values essential for succeeding in real-world environments. As a course requirement for graduating, its implementation requires addressing challenges for program implementers, such as making students and teachers have relevant competencies, acquiring fund bases, and safety considerations, among others. Moreover, educational leaders are primarily responsible for solving some issues to ensure this goal is achieved. In addition, according to Galias (2021), the implementation of work immersion is essential for Grade 12 students to acquire real-world skills and opportunities to become accustomed to the workplace through workshops, laboratories, real-life experience, or immersion. Nevertheless, the commitment, skills, and innovativeness of TVL teachers are the existing problems of the work immersion program. They are more highlighted during the uncertain health crisis. According to the International Labor Organization (2021), between 95 percent and 100 percent of institutions of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) worldwide shut down training partners during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the closing of the business impeded the adoption of work-based learning because the implementation of workplace and skill-based training is crucial, difficult to reproduce, and challenging to give via remote modalities. The activities were either discontinued or scaled back significantly.

In the Philippines, the K-12 curriculum and its program experienced overwhelming issues and must undergo a series of revisions and inspections. Also, to its curriculum hallmark, the implementation of the work immersion program faced vast challenges due to the need for necessary program resources. Moreover, the implementers of work immersion programs must focus more on hiring skilled educators and essential infrastructures intended for workshop rooms and laboratories to accommodate institutional assessment and real-life learning to provide the skills demanded by various industries. Additionally, businesses do not support public school students' on-the-job training and are reluctant to hire high school graduates (Cogal et al., 2019).

According to Tabora (2014), the plan for K-12 SHS curriculum is facing a severe problem, and the "core curriculum" requirement and its hallmark work immersion program are extensive. The educational leaders believed that students would need more time to develop the real-life skills that the industry requires within the confines of the senior high school period.

Despite the plan for work-related training and pre-work drills or simulations, developing the multiskilled pupils required by industry is impossible due to its limited program resources, especially in the Technical Vocational Track. In addition, the need for a curriculum contextualization as patent to the resources available in each location and a "Mindanao perspective" to meet the requirements and talents of students in the Mindanao region.

With the empirical evidence on the status of the senior high school curriculum and its key features, the work immersion program, it is necessary to examine the lived experiences of senior high school focal persons regarding implementing a work immersion program in Region Eleven schools more closely according to Brillantes et al. (2019), as confronted with various challenges in implementing multiple senior high school curriculum programs. The limited program inputs test SHS focal persons' management capability. The focal persons are at the forefront of implementing work immersion. So, understanding their perspectives may give insights into how they can navigate administrative demands, interface with industry partners, and facilitate students. This knowledge could empower implementers with better tools and training. As a result, delving more into the challenges experienced by SHS focal persons in managing the work immersion program in their respective communities motivates me to conduct this study.

2. Literature Review

Work immersion helps students develop collaboration, communication, punctuality, productivity, decision-making, reliability, and professional competence while strengthening work-related skills and creating employment prospects (Acut et al., 2021). According to Putri (2021), the Department of Education requires work immersion for SHS students as a graduation prerequisite, providing real-world experience and bridging education to employment or entrepreneurship. Mandated by DepEd No. 30, s. 2017, work immersion aligns education with national development goals. Panganiban and Olido (2018) highlight its role in workplace familiarity and employment simulation, while Schreiber (2012) emphasizes the importance of service components in strengthening immersion programs. Petil (2016) stresses its role in building competencies, work ethics, and values for further education and workforce entry.

According to Villaverde and Gabotero (2019), work immersion broadens students' horizons, helping students explore career options and mature through real-world challenges.

With 80 required hours of practical learning, work immersion exposes Grade 12 students to actual work settings, enhancing their field-specific competencies (The Asia Foundation, 2018). Moreover, Bevins and Price (2015) emphasize the role of STEM education and innovation as key drivers of economic growth, identifying STEM-trained individuals as significant contributors to innovation and economic output. While promising, further efforts are necessary to ensure its long-term success and impact. Similarly, Montemayor (2018) noted criticisms of the Senior High School (SHS) Program, such as skills-job mismatches, but highlighted the Department of Education's primary goal of improving the nation's educational standards rather than immediate employment outcomes.

K-12 education, globally recognized as the standard for primary education, is in its early adoption stages in the Philippines. Hence, Robles (2018) emphasized the importance of profiling Grade 10 students and their families to prepare universities for the first SHS batch. Additionally, Aldevera et al. (2019) explored challenges faced by SHS teachers, such as disruptive behavior, resource limitations, and accountability policies, which underscored the complexities of implementing the SHS curriculum. Combalicer (2016) found that instructors developed best practices in three of five key areas during the initial implementation of the K+12 Curriculum. However, no best practices were identified in learning resources, instructional methodologies, or procedures. The study, conducted during the 2014-2015 school year, provided critical insights into best practices to adopt and challenges to address for the benefit of learners. Using descriptive-correlation research, it highlighted teachers' most pressing issues during the early deployment of K+12.

Weldon (2020) highlighted job training programs in Houston aimed at empowering low-income adults and high school seniors by enhancing economic self-sufficiency and educational progress. Apprenticeships in Asia have shown positive outcomes in soft skill development and employability compared to school-based training, boosting motivation and confidence in young workers (Swiss Foundation for Technical Cooperation, 2019). Internship programs bridge classroom learning with practical applications, enhancing students' educational experiences by linking theoretical and applied knowledge (Fitchburg State University, 2019). Similarly, Indiana University of Pennsylvania (2018) emphasized on-the-job training as crucial for building industry competencies and improving job market readiness, particularly in hospitality and tourism.

The work immersion program familiarizes students with job-relevant environments under the guidance of industry experts, enhancing technical, communication, and interpersonal skills while instilling positive work habits (Malipot, 2020). Victory Christian International School (2016) emphasized that work immersion transforms school-taught concepts into lasting real-world experiences. To address pandemic disruptions, DepEd launched Oplan TAWID with Microsoft and CloudSwyft, leveraging technology to ensure skill development and employability for Grade 12 students (Microsoft Philippines Communications Team, 2022). Sandoval (2017) highlighted guidelines for students under 15, limiting work immersion to four hours daily with parental consent, ensuring it does not replace workers' benefits. Part of the SHS curriculum, work immersion requires 80 hours of hands-on experience, exposing students to real-world job contexts to enhance school-based skills without constituting employment (Department of Labor and Employment, 2017).

The Department Order 030, series of 2017, provides guidelines for implementing work immersion in Senior High Schools (SHS), promoting collaboration with various institutions to enhance students' skills (Department of Education, 2017). The Department Memorandum CI-00085, series of 2020, highlights strategies for continuing work immersion during crises, such as the pandemic, using remote learning and contextualized tasks to assess students' skills (Department of Education, 2020). On the other hand, Republic Act No. 10533 established the Senior High School program to strengthen students' skills for higher education or employment, with work immersion designed to prepare them for real-world work challenges (Bustamante, 2019). Carlos (2018) notes that work immersion allows students to work up to 240 hours per term, with restrictions for those under 15. According to the Division Memorandum No. 262, series of 2017, students must complete work immersion in a relevant business, monitored by industry personnel, teachers, and SHS focal persons, with evaluation through industry ratings and portfolio assessments. Additionally, the Department of Education's Department Order 032, series of 2020, outlines guidelines for engaging Learning Support Aides to support continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of Senior High School focal persons concerning the work immersion program in Region XI in the Philippines. Creswell (2014) asserted that to

comprehend the meanings individuals attribute to their social contexts comprehensively; the qualitative research design is fit to use. In addition, Rovai et al. (2014) proposed that this methodology promotes a nuanced, subjective understanding attuned to personality, culture, and social justice.

The study design conformed to Creswell's (2013) guidelines for phenomenological research, including purposive sampling for relevance and representation, and incorporated in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 12 participants. Participants were chosen equitably in conformance with Patton's (2015) criteria for purposive sampling. Moreover, the researchers afforded transparent and equitable conditions to the participants' selection during the study process per the following criteria: a public senior high school focal person and worked immersion program coordinators from any school in Region XI who had implemented work immersion programs for at least three years.

Creswell (2013) emphasized that qualitative researchers are involved in various data collection tasks. In this study, the researcher prepared the data gathering methods, which included collection, analysis, organization, and interpretation. To establish credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, the criteria were followed (Elo et al. 2014). Techniques like member checks, technique triangulation, and an audit trail helped in increasing the dependability, transparency, and objectivity of the findings.

The researcher seeks approval from the Department of Education Regional Office XI and a letter to division superintendents, school principals, and SHS focal persons. The researcher discussed the thorough overview of the study's aims and methods to the participants. Additionally, the participants of the study were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and informed consent was given and obtained before the interview. Guiding questions were formulated and checked, and interviews were arranged based on participant preferences. Interviews were recorded using an audio recorder.

Furthermore, the data obtained was transcribed, evaluated, and distributed to participants for verification. Virtual consultations were conducted to discuss the findings and conclusions. All data were stored securely in password-protected files, while hard copies of transcripts and signed consent forms were kept in a locked cabinet. After that, the physical copies were destroyed using a shredding machine in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

4. Results and Discussion

Participant responses revealed the theme, "program limitations and concerns," which reflected challenging experiences on the part of focal persons. These included finding industry partners, schedule conflicts, limited resources and safety concerns.

4.1. Challenges of Senior High School Focal Persons in the Implementation of Work Immersion Program

Program limitations and concerns. The senior high school work immersion coordinators faced program challenges. As per Department standards, senior high school focal persons must administer the work immersion program for SHS students to fulfill its goal. However, throughout program implementation, participants faced tremendous challenges that prohibited them from executing the program well. Implementers face variable and laborious challenges that test their strategies. They also believe that the above challenges must be examined because they will guide specific decisions, especially during implementation.

Troubled in finding industry partners. The Department of Education requires partner institutions and work immersion sites for senior high school work immersion to be thoroughly investigated, screened, and planned to guarantee a secure, safe, and adequate learning environment. Due to the neighborhood's few businesses, these restrictions were regularly ignored. Forbes and Balajo (2019) found not exclusively partner colleges for programs. Job immersion has hampered field exposure for some because they were not exposed to the final year high school course. Some schools need help identifying work immersion partners since potential partners don't know the SHS curriculum (Brillantes et al., 2019). In addition, Ramos (2020) claimed that adopting the TVL track in senior high school curricula could be improved by difficulties with instructional delivery, work immersion, partnership issues, and a need for more educated instructors.

Stressed due to the overlapping of schedules. The objectives of the work immersion program are obstructed by redundant roles, activities, and lessons, constraining students' capacity to concentrate on experiential learning. The Department requires 80 hours of work immersion, hence increasing the obligations of senior high coordinators. Collaboration with the Joint Voucher Delivery Program and NC II examinations imposes additional pressure on

the curriculum, resulting in schedule conflicts that could undermine work immersion goals. Cabansag (2021) indicated that students and educators encounter temporal limitations and schedule difficulties, resulting in insufficient time for concentrated, practical engagement. According to Cogal et al. (2019), the K-12 curriculum is undergoing a series of evaluations to establish its systemic usefulness. Immersion in the workplace is the unusual reality of the senior high curriculum. It was revealed that students are overwhelmed with school activities, remaining topics, and work immersion, leaving little time for hands-on learning activities.

Constrained due to inaccessibility of program resources. A key challenge for senior high school program coordinators in implementing work immersion programs is the lack of access to essential resources. While the program is well-planned, its execution is hindered by insufficient learning materials, training tools, equipment, and funding for transportation and coordination. Public schools often lack the facilities necessary for hands-on training before deployment. Aldevera et al. (2019) highlighted that teachers struggled to apply immersion skills to specialized subjects due to inadequate resources. Similarly, Gamboa et al. (2020) noted that DepEd policies face challenges from insufficient teaching materials. Improving school facilities, hiring specialists, fostering industry partnerships, and training teachers in modern methods are recommended to enhance program effectiveness.

Overwhelmed by safety and security issues. Safety and security are critical concerns for high school coordinators in work immersion programs. Coordinators emphasized that without a secure learning environment, students may struggle to focus on skill acquisition, and their well-being could be at risk. During deployment, concerns from stakeholders about student safety overwhelmed coordinators. To mitigate risks, parents were required to sign releases prior to deployment. Galias (2021) noted that teachers and school officials are liable for accidents, injuries, and other issues like harassment or abuse during activities, including work immersion. Additionally, toxic workplace cultures encountered during on-the-job training (OJT) can negatively impact students, as reprimands or ridicule may hinder growth. According to the pupils, traveling may sometimes be challenging and demanding (Garrido & Gahera, 2018). If there are uncertainties, it is a danger to children's safety for the school, parents, and corporations that are accountable.

4.2. Coping Mechanisms of Senior High School Focal Persons in the Implementation of Work Immersion Program

To manage with the challenging part of implementing work immersion program, proactive strategies were then employed, such as: building stakeholder relationships through developing training matrices and their continuity plans, organizing their skills training, and discussing WIP guidelines and policies.

Proactive actions. According to the participants, the execution of the work immersion program may be met with good coordination and administration. This method decreases disagreements, errors, and other organizational problems such as misunderstanding, delays, and disinterest. Proactive actions of implementers ensure the effective running of the organization. Thus, cooperation expedites the achievement of an organization's objectives. Therefore, instructors, students, and other stakeholders may participate in determining the program's requirements and be aware of its implementation guidelines and procedures.

Establish relationships with industry partners. Developing strong relationships with industry partners is a key strategy for overcoming challenges in implementing work immersion programs. This approach addresses the limited number of industry partners and enhances program sustainability. Coordinators employ strategic methods to connect with firms within and beyond their areas to create cost-effective programs. By using innovative and competitive tactics, they aim to attract both corporate and government institutions to establish partnerships, ensuring the program's successful execution. Garcia and Yazon (2020) suggest that schools must constantly be encouraged to work with partner industries to help suit and enhance the skills of the students to be productively immersed and prepared for future jobs. Delos Santos (2019) said that it is also critical to build collaborations with other offices or agencies to work as partners on the execution of the work immersion program to achieve program success.

Craft a dynamic training matrix and program continuity plans. A critical strategy for overcoming barriers in the work immersion program. By establishing preemptive training schedules, activities, and standardized procedures, coordinators provide a structured guide for teachers, students, and stakeholders. This approach supports effective management, allowing them to address uncertainties proactively and adapt to challenges throughout implementation.

Quimson and Matabang (2019) recommended a comprehensive training plan with detailed activities to help immersion instructors manage and lead the program efficiently. In addition, as the senior high school's focal point for the work immersion program, it is a tedious responsibility to adhere to the Department of Education's norms and procedures before deployment. Before creating a deployment schedule for the students, the work immersion focal people must acquire work immersion needs, including a plan of action to handle the expected issue, legalities, and commitments of both sides (Budomo, 2020).

Organize a skills training and institutional assessment. To enhance students' readiness for real-world work immersion there is a need for pre-deployment training, seminars, and evaluations to equip students with essential competencies and support career growth. The Department of Education and TESDA's Joint Working Group (JWG) ensures standardized training and addresses technical-vocational challenges through skill-building activities, fostering better preparation for real-world job exposure (Department of Education, 2019). On the other hand, the partner businesses might indeed continue to show their strong support by providing institution-based training prior to the learners' actual employment, preferably before they graduate from the Senior High Program, to properly equip them for the educational vents of their choosing (Garcia & Yazon, 2020).

Communicate work immersion guidelines and policies. Proper coordination and orientation enable stakeholders to comprehend the program's methods and reasons. Additionally, it explains and answers the uncertainty that existed before and throughout course implementation. It will also make the hallmark of program implementation simpler to accomplish and apply. Work Immersion Program orientation is essential for senior high school students to obtain full knowledge of the relevance of work immersion and for parents, as significant stakeholders, to comprehend the value of the subject matter corresponding to the two extra years in high school (Figueras & Mendoza, 2020). In addition, Data and Pareja (2022) suggested that instructors of the students participating in work immersion programs should present an orientation outlining the program's methodology and expectations to parents and students.

4.3. Insights Drawn from the Experience on the Implementation of the Work Immersion Program

A senior high school focal person's implementation strategy is critical in accomplishing the program objectives. According to the participants, implementers need to bear in mind the program priorities and sustainable actions to improve the student's learning environment and overall academic progress. The SHS focal person share their insights to better implementation the work immersion program:

Include work immersion program to school planning. A key theme from senior high school focal persons is the need to include work immersion programs in school planning. As a cyclical process, planning is essential for achieving its goals. Including work immersion in the annual implementation and school improvement plans allows for proactive problem-solving and ensures that feedback from previous programs informs future strategies. This approach helps address the challenges faced during implementation and supports sustainable, deliberate improvements. Planning and scheduling are essential for creating a baseline standard of productivity and success of a school program. Implementers would only know if they were meeting objectives if a specific plan is put in place with a specific desired outcome determined by the completion date. Planning must include deadlines that allow for the proper identification and resolution of problems (Leonard, 2019). Moreover, according to Lynch (2020), proactive education leaders are the ones who approach inconvenient situations with enthusiasm. They plan to be able to identify and isolate potential issues before they become significant issues. This allows the school to avoid major crises and operate with the fewest disruptions possible. Also, they can devise a solution to the potential problem of a program before it becomes widely known.

Appreciate the significance of program evaluation and monitoring. The second insight drawn from the senior high school focal persons' experiences in implementing the Work Immersion Program is program monitoring and evaluation. It helps track and analyze data throughout the program's lifecycle, providing evidence to support decisions and actions. This proactive approach allows for addressing issues during implementation and contributes to developing sustainable policies that align with the goals of the senior high school curriculum. According to Vecino and Doroma (2020), there have been emerging issues in the

insufficiency of documents to establish the extent of the work immersion program implementation. Hence, there should be enough supervision and monitoring to address the most encountered challenges in the immersion implementation. Acar (2019) discovered that to successfully implement the work immersion program, and there must be scheduled monitoring and feedback of the students throughout the implementation process to address and find the weak points of the immersion program.

Adapt best practices through benchmarking. The third insight drawn from the experiences of work immersion program implementers is to adapt the best practices of their fellow program implementers through benchmarking. They noted that while the program presents recurring challenges, benchmarking with other schools helps address uncertainties and improve performance. By evaluating successful practices, focal persons can develop effective policies and guidelines to enhance student competency and ensure continuous improvement. According to Corpuz (2018), benchmarking gives a program coordinator or implementer a better, if not the best, quality experience in facilitating a deeper understanding of effective school and program management. Thus, the information and the best practices discovered can be used as a backbone or foundation for a proactive implementation strategy. Batugal et al. (2019) discovered that the work immersion program implementation process produced Best Practices, which will serve as a benchmark for other schools in the division and a guide for sustainable future implementation.

Value the importance of setting up a memorandum of agreement. An important insight from senior high school focal persons is the need to establish a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with partner industries to secure long-term partnerships and address industry reluctance to participate in work immersion programs. The MOA, as outlined in Department Order No. 30 Series of 2017, ensures clear policies, guidelines, and arrangements for both parties. It fosters collaboration, facilitates flexible work immersion options for students, and ensures the provision of mutual benefits for stakeholders and industries involved (Castro et al., 2019).

5. Conclusion

The successful implementation of the work immersion program in senior high schools requires strategic planning, proactive execution, and strong partnerships to overcome challenges such as finding industry partners, scheduling conflicts, limited resources, and safety concerns. By integrating the program into school planning, conducting regular evaluations, and benchmarking best practices, the program's effectiveness can be significantly enhanced. Establishing MOA ensures long-term collaboration and clear guidelines between schools and industry partners, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship. Moreover, effective resource management and communication, alongside ongoing program monitoring, are key to addressing challenges and ensuring continuous improvement. Ultimately, the program's success hinges on the collaborative efforts of schools, industries, and government agencies to create a sustainable and impactful learning experience for students. Moreover, Revisiting the program can be significant and beneficial to the learners and the implementers for sustainability and development of this program.

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