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Exploring the Meaning of Internship Experiences Among Undergraduate Students of Nonformal Education at Manado State University Using Photo Elicitation

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the internship experiences of Non-Formal Education students and the meaning they construct from those experiences through the use of photo elicitation methods. The research questions focus on revealing the internship experiences of undergraduate students in the Non-Formal Education Program at Manado State University and how they interpret those experiences. The study employed a qualitative research method with a theoretical perspective grounded in the interpretivist paradigm and the epistemological foundation of constructionism. The research was conducted at a public university in central Indonesia. A total of 17 participants (6 males and 11 females) were involved in this study, selected through saturation sampling. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews. The findings of this study reveal three main themes or units of meaning regarding the internship experiences of undergraduate students in the Non-Formal Education Program at Manado State University: students' internship experiences, the meanings students attribute to their internships, and the continuity of competencies gained from internship experiences. These three themes are interrelated and diverse. First, the theme of students' internship experiences includes seven subthemes. Second, the theme of the meaning of internship from the students' perspective consists of nine subthemes. Third, the theme of the tendency for competency continuity includes five subthemes.

1. Introduction

Internships are an important agenda for students. Internship programs have been running since the 11th century (Taylor, 2014). However, the internship system, which aims to provide students with work experience, only developed in the 20th century, when

this practical experience was incorporated into the educational curriculum. The term "internship" was first concretely applied in the 1920s. The government, along with business actors, adopted the term to package a program in the form of inter-agency cooperation (education and business) that began to be offered to universities in the 1960s.

The internship program continues to this day because it is considered to be able to build effective mutualistic relationships between business actors and students as the components involved (Lisdiantini et al., [2022](#)). This program has the characteristics of enhancing educational and professional development, emphasizing experiential learning, providing a platform for career exploration and development, bridging the gap between theory and practice, involving various stakeholders (educational institutions; industry players; and students), and having a significant impact on characteristics; values, and work performance (Asperis, [2024](#); Harrison, [2017](#); Ismail et al., [2017](#); Wolinsky-Nahmias & Auerbach, [2022](#)). Internship programs create a sense of urgency for implementation for all parties involved (Harrison, [2017](#); Shakil et al., [2023](#)).

As time goes by, increasingly complex human life requires increased competency through education to accommodate self-preparation for the world of work. Furthermore, education in this era promotes 21st-century skills that require basic skills in the form of the 4Cs: creative thinking; critical thinking and problem solving; communication; and collaboration. Furthermore, the 4Cs have now evolved further to enhance the role of skills, becoming the 6Cs, with the addition of character and citizenship skills. These six skills can be learned and applied through internships. This means that internship programs can serve as a bridge between theoretical learning and practical application of the 6Cs in real life, in order to meet the demands of the 21st century. In line with the Merdeka Belajar—Kampus Merdeka (Independent Campus) transformation, MBKM emphasizes applied learning according to fields. MBKM strongly recommends internship programs be implemented in higher education. Internships reflect the fundamental concept of the duality between theory and practice (Nasiri et al., [2023](#)).

The job readiness students gain from internships comes from the stimulation of improving technical skills (hard skills) and non-technical skills (soft skills). Through internship programs, students can truly transfer knowledge into practical skills in real life (Chu, [2020](#); Micabalo et al., [2020](#); Murnawan et al., [2022](#)). This is a follow-up to the conceptual knowledge students previously acquired in higher education. Internships are defined as crucial for students' transition from academia to the professional world. This experiential learning method in a real-world work environment also plays a significant role in improving graduate quality through practical experience in a field. Furthermore, internships are said to make a significant contribution to promoting

policies related to human resource development within legislative regulatory authorities (Mihail, [2022](#)). Specifically, internship programs provide macro and micro benefits to several parties, as they fulfill proportional roles and responsibilities.

Internships should be understood as learning activities that provide students with practical insight and experience related to real-world issues within the institution, enabling them to develop adequate competencies in their respective fields. This understanding allows students to assess and improve their professional skills. Internships can also be broadly interpreted in terms of deeper benefits. This is what students hope for after completing an internship, which has emerged as an ideal professional experience, including skills development; enhanced connections; industry understanding; job opportunities; self-confidence development; and even career development (Mishra et al., [2022](#)).

Contrary to the intended meaning of internships as outlined above, the current interpretation of internships has not truly resonated with students. New students may simply state the general meaning of internships, without truly understanding the benefits they receive. This means that internships are often interpreted as fulfilling university obligations. Internships often have varying interpretations, creating gaps in student understanding and expectations. Students often view internships as an opportunity to gain practical experience; improve employability; and build professional connections. Some of the most prominent definitions of internships include "experience," "learning," and "connections" (Zakaria et al., [2020](#)).

Exploring the meaning of internships is emphasized because it is crucial for understanding their diverse roles in education and workforce preparation. This helps identify the benefits of internships in various aspects while addressing challenges such as potential exploitation and the need for better integration with academic programs. By examining the deeper meaning of internships, educational institutions and industry can collaborate to optimize the internship experience. Parties can better ensure they meet their intended educational and professional development goals (Galloway et al., [2014](#); Wang, [2017](#); Mokhtar, [2019](#); Zehr, [2020](#)).

Non-formal education is a field closely linked to community life. This field has a fairly broad scope. This broad scope is related to the important role of non-formal education in social change and community development, with a focus on improving technical

skills and social transformation (Barua, 2009). Non-formal education also functions as a complement or additional option to formal education, aiming to create intelligent, skilled, and independent citizens. Currently, non-formal education has developed into a significant educational force, influencing the formal education system and adopting innovative learning designs to address diverse needs and contribute to personal and community development. Thus, the role of internships in non-formal education is also fundamental.

The meaning of internships can be clearly revealed through phenomenological studies. Phenomenology aims to explore the essence of experiences from the perspective of individuals who have actually experienced or participated in a specific context. This study allows researchers to deepen their understanding of a person's experience and provides rich and detailed insights often missed by other methods (Asdlori, 2023; Dogdson, 2023).

The meaning of internship discussed in phenomenological research can be studied in a more structured and in-depth manner by utilizing the photo-elicitation method. This method was first introduced by anthropologist John Collier Jr. and has become increasingly popular in social research (Ying-Qing, 2023). Photo-elicitation is a method in qualitative research that seeks to incorporate photo media analysis into interviews to increase the richness of the data collected. Furthermore, photo-elicitation can provide unique insights and details not accessible using traditional methods (oral or written) by harnessing the power of visual stimuli to evoke responses.

A phenomenological study explores the meaning of internships among undergraduate students in the Non-Formal Education Study Program at a university using photo elicitation. Phenomenological studies are considered appropriate for exploring the meaning of internships using photo elicitation. Phenomenological studies play a crucial role in understanding and interpreting individual life experiences by exploring their perceptions and interpretations of a phenomenon. Currently, the exploration of the meaning of internships has not been fully explored. Various studies have only addressed findings on one aspect or meaning. For example, research conducted by Azwar (2019) revealed the significance of implementing an internship program on students' self-confidence. Layyeta et al. (2023) examined the meaning of internships in terms of job suitability. Furthermore, research by Siregar et al. (2024) revealed the meaning of internships in terms of student competency development.

The internship program requires an empirical review to meet the program's objectives by focusing on students as interns or the main subjects of the internship. This is a fundamental consideration so that the success of the internship program can be measured effectively and efficiently. Based on the complexity that is a manifestation of the challenges in implementing internships, there needs to be an answer to the question of how to reveal students' internship experiences as the seeds of the emergence of the meaning of internships among students of the Non-Formal Education Study Program. This certainly requires considering the use of the photo elicitation method as a method deemed appropriate for uncovering meaning in depth.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research method. The choice of this qualitative research method was based on the consideration that the purpose of this type of research is to explore all aspects related to the meaning of internships as derived from the experiences of student interns. Furthermore, qualitative research allows researchers to assess the essence of the internship's meaning. Efforts to uncover the experience, meaning, and essence of internships focus on the results for evaluating the internship program, thus requiring a thorough research approach that focuses on in-depth study. Consequently, the methodological consequence is that the researcher relies on a constructionist epistemology with an interpretivist theoretical perspective.

The research participants were students majoring in Non-Formal Education at a state university in central Indonesia. The study targeted students from the classes of 2020, 2021, and 2022 who had completed a 3-month internship program in their sixth semester at several non-formal educational institutions in Sulawesi. Considering gender balance, the number of participants in this study was 17 (6 males and 11 females). Research that focuses solely on students is considered to involve those who experience the same phenomenon, namely internships. As is the characteristic of phenomenological studies, the exploration of phenomena with a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, Creswell (2018) also recommend that data collection from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon should be done using in-depth and repeated interviews.

3. Results and Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological research is to uncover the internship experiences of Non-Formal Education students and the meanings constructed from these experiences through the use of photo elicitation methods. The focus of this research question, among others, are (1) what are the internship experiences obtained by undergraduate students of the Non-Formal Education Study Program at Manado State University? (2) how do students interpret these internship experiences? and (3) what is the essence of these students' internship experiences? This research adopts the research principle. The analysis reveals three main themes or units of meaning, namely students' internship experiences, the meaning of students' internships, and the continuity of competencies from students' internship experiences. This section explains the units or themes of meaning through horizontal representation, textural and structural descriptions (grouping of meanings), and a description of the essence of the internship.

Internships are considered important by the majority of students. Galbraith (2020) define an internship as an "official or formal program" to provide practical experience for beginners in a job or profession. Internships are crucial for career exploration and development and offer opportunities to develop soft skills, such as communication; time management; leadership; and teamwork, which are often highlighted as competencies in need of improvement by employers (Cheang, 2023). Internships provide an opportunity to integrate theoretical and practical experiences.

Internship Experience Gained by Undergraduate Students of the Non-Formal Education Study Program

The first research question was formulated to examine the internship experiences of undergraduate students in the Non-Formal Education Study Program. More specifically, this study explores individual internship experiences from various institutions to describe broader meanings. These internship experiences are also shaped by the different roles and tasks of each individual. This description of the internship experience aligns with the internship characteristics framework as outlined by Collage to simultaneously evaluate the ideal outcomes of internships in the Non-Formal Education Study Program.

Disclosure of internship experiences begins with examining the background of the interns, who are the most important subjects in this study. Interns are the individuals most empowered to express the

experiences they feel and experience directly. The diverse backgrounds of interns can increase cultural sensitivity and awareness within the team, thereby fostering an inclusive and understanding work environment (Harrison, 2017). By examining the age range, academic year, and concentration of interns, which fall under the internship background subtheme, participants' presence is increasingly taken into account.

The internship experience data obtained came from participants aged 20–22. These students were students from the 2020, 2021, and 2022 intakes of the Non-Formal Education Study Program. Since the 1980s, internships have been undertaken by students of various majors. They underwent a three-month internship in their sixth semester, based on internship theory learned in their third semester. The three-month internship duration meets the characteristics of an ideal internship. The duration of an internship program should range from four to 12 weeks and beyond, following agency policy (Mwelwa, 2021).

In terms of age, student interns are in the productive age category. Therefore, they are eligible for practical experience through internships. Furthermore, students are being educated towards job readiness. Within the Non-Formal Education Study Program, participants' study concentrations are divided into three categories (PAUD, PGSD, and general). The background of these chosen concentrations serves as a guide for interns to gather as much internship experience as possible. The internship experience gained is closely tied to their chosen study program and concentration.

The Meaning of Internship Experiences of Undergraduate Students in Non-Formal Education Study Program: An Exploration with Photo Elicitation Interviews.

The meaning of internship experience of undergraduate students of Non-Formal Education Study Program is the research question 2. This section focuses on the creation of meaning centered on the internship experience of students of Non-Formal Education Study Program based on their perspectives. The analysis reveals elements of internship meaning including opinions, internship achievements, reasons for meaningful internship, internship provisions, greatest satisfaction during the internship, forms of positive contribution, ways of work responsibilities, challenges, ways of interpreting challenges and failures, personal changes after the internship, strengthened by the choice of photos and metaphorical meanings related to the internship.

Internships are often interpreted in various ways, creating gaps in understanding and expectations among students. Students often view internships as an opportunity to gain practical experience, improve employability, and build professional connections. Some of the most prominent definitions of internships include "experience," "learning," and "connections" (Zakaria et al., [2020](#)). College internships are a form of out-of-class learning experience that serves as job training for various professions (Bawica, [2021](#); Smith et al., [2023](#)). This opinion aligns with the findings of participants' definitions of internships. Most participants defined internships as "learning while working" or "simulating work." Essentially, the research data demonstrates students' positive opinions about the meaning of internships.

This is evidenced by the achievements students attained during their internships. Students achieved the goals they had hoped for when choosing an internship program that aligned with their Non-Formal Education program. These internship achievements were seen as an effort to give meaning to the internship. This means that the students took the internship seriously, even embracing the realities of the working world. Participants stated that various work achievements aligned with the role and institution of the internship.

Based on the aforementioned achievements, participants also recognized the significance of internships for various reasons. Their perspective on the meaningfulness of internships was that they considered them beneficial and important; they increased knowledge, experience, insight, and motivation; they taught participants how to anticipate problems, adapt, and understand the character of personnel; and they provided opportunities for participants to teach all ages. Participants considered internships meaningful because they were related to curriculum development. By integrating internships into the curriculum, educational institutions can forge stronger partnerships with partners to facilitate a smoother recruitment process and ensure that graduates meet employer expectations (Banyunitri, [2014](#)). These reasons emphasize the meaningfulness of internships.

Apprenticeship It becomes meaningful when it becomes a learning experience because students enter internships without any prior knowledge. Some students bring general theory, but it's still minimal. They believe that support from various parties, both study programs and internship sites, is essential. Under these circumstances, students truly feel compelled to fully explore the meaning of internships. It's extremely

difficult to enter any profession without basic exposure to its practical aspects (Najmuddeen, [2020](#)).

The Essence of the Internship Experience of Undergraduate Students in the Non-Formal Education Study Program.

Research question 3 focuses on uncovering the essence of the internship experience of undergraduate students in the Non-Formal Education Study Program as a continuation of the experience and meaning of the internship. The essence attempts to describe the students' follow-up on the main things learned from the internship. The essence of the internship is seen from the career perspectives students gain after the internship. Students' career orientation provides important initial information regarding their future lives (Aktas et al., [2018](#)).

All participants revealed they had specific career visions after their internships. They considered becoming early childhood education (PAUD) teachers, kindergarten teachers, elementary school teachers, community service workers, civil servants, village officials, or entrepreneurs. Upon closer examination, these career visions align with their internship experiences and the meaning of internships previously expressed. Several students received job offers from internship institutions. While not all students received offers, the sense of self-worth and affirmation from knowing that their skills and time were valued significantly impacted the interns' self-confidence. Students were able to enter the workforce as "advanced entry-level" employees (Barbarash, [2016](#)). Students need non-formal learning through informal internships, team-building activities, social networking, and job rotations, which individually or collectively can develop student competencies to meet practical professional requirements (Purwito et al., [2021](#)).

Students embody the essence of internships by designing post-internship plans. They reflect on the importance, even for their future selves, of leveraging their internship roles to learn from their daily work (Carlsson et al., [2023](#)). Post-internship, students feel they can immediately think structurally to prepare for new responsibilities: teach; improve skills; share knowledge; apply theories and practices learned from the internship; serve in their villages; establish study centers; and learn more about computers.

In addition to developing career perspectives and post-internship plans, students gain a platform for learning and professional development through understanding the essence of internships. Commitment to

professional development and mentorship can attract top talent (Wawer, 2022). Participants identified discipline, adaptability, problem-solving, retention of learning, and feedback on work performance as ways they can develop during internships and implement them in their professional lives. To develop these qualities, informal interns must be taught to think, adapt, and solve problems (Melania et al., 2024).

One of the goals of internships for non-formal education students is to develop the ability to analyze learning strategies and evaluation systems within non-formal educational institutions. Furthermore, participants identified three competency components from the internship they desired to pursue: experience; knowledge; and skills relevant to their field of study. The greater the experience, knowledge, and skills acquired, the greater the value of a person's capital, thereby enhancing their work ability and productivity (Melania et al, 2024).

4. Conclusion

This study aims to describe the meaning of internship experiences of undergraduate students in the Non-Formal Education Study Program at Manado State University through a phenomenological approach using the photo elicitation method. The results of the study reveal three main interrelated themes, namely student internship experiences, the meaning of internships for students, and the sustainability of competencies gained from internship experiences.

The first theme, student internship experiences, includes seven sub-themes: internship history, preparation before the internship, initial conditions of the internship, conditions after the first week, internship activities, forms of responsibility, and challenges. The results showed that internships were a first experience for most students. Preparation from study programs was not mandatory or uniform, so students had difficulty adapting at the beginning of their internships. Student activities and responsibilities varied according to the policies of the internship institutions. As a first experience, students also faced various challenges during the internship process.

The second theme discusses the meaning of internships from the students' perspective through nine sub-themes, namely student opinions, internship achievements, reasons for the meaningfulness of internships, preparation, greatest satisfaction, positive contributions, ways of interpreting challenges and failures, personal changes after internships, and photo selection and their metaphorical meanings. The photo

elicitation method shows the diversity of students' views on internships. The depth of the meaning of internships is influenced by the achievements obtained, especially those in line with the tasks and roles during the internship. Despite limited preparation, students feel a high level of satisfaction, are able to make positive contributions, and experience significant personal changes. Overall, the photos selected reflect the positive meaning of internships.

The third theme is the sustainability of internship competencies, which includes five sub-themes: career perspectives, post-internship plans, professional development, key competencies, and contributions to community education. Students began to realize the importance of developing soft skills and identified three key competencies, namely experience, knowledge, and skills. The sustainability of the meaning of this internship strengthens the role of students in applying Non-Formal Education competencies to advance community education.

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