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ABSTRACT

This mixed-method study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of graduates of the Master of Arts in Education major in Early Childhood Education (MAEd in ECE) at the College of Education, Tarlac State University who completed the program between 2014 and 2020. Specifically, it examined the competencies developed through the program, the professional and career outcomes experienced by the graduates, and their recommendations for enhancing the curriculum. A mixed-method research design was used. Data were collected through interviews with 11 out of 13 graduates, representing an 84.62% participation rate across the eight-year-period. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to the graduates' learning experiences and professional development. The findings revealed that the program strengthened graduates' competencies in pedagogical leadership, classroom management, and inclusive pedagogical practices. Graduates also reported tangible benefits, including career advancement, increased professional recognition, leadership opportunities, and financial growth. Furthermore, the graduates recommended expanding practicum opportunities, modernizing the curriculum to address emerging educational trends, and integrating inclusive approaches to better prepare future educators. These findings demonstrate that the MAEd in ECE program offered at TSU remains relevant, responsive, and aligned with quality assurance standards in teacher education. The study provides evidence to support the implementation of the proposed institutional action plan for curriculum enhancement and offers insights that may guide higher education institutions in strengthening graduate programs through curriculum innovation, inclusive pedagogical practices, and international initiatives.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the literature by exploring graduates' experiences and perceptions in a Master of Arts in Education, Early Childhood Education program. It offers insights into competency relevance, career outcomes, and program improvement, and enhances understanding of how graduate training supports professional practice, leadership development, and quality-enhancement initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a vehicle and a catalyst for social change, and it is anticipated to bring about a qualitative shift in people's perceptions, attitudes, practices, priorities, and aspirations. Education has the potential to foster the promotion of mutual respect and collaboration as well as the development of constructive connections between the community and other organizations (Gross et al., 2015). In addition, education is significant in fostering social and economic growth (Ziberi, Rexha, Ibraimi, & Avdiaj, 2022).

Higher education institutions are then mandated to produce qualified graduates who can compete in the job market and contribute to nation-building (Commission on Higher Education, 1994). To satisfy this function, Tarlac State University (TSU) must ensure that graduates find relevant employment aligned with their degree and training.

One of the ways by which schools can evaluate the relevance of curricular offerings is to conduct a study that will provide feedback from the graduates on how their training during the time they were completing their courses was helpful in finding a job, doing the tasks assigned to them, and in their career promotion. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can use the tracer study to gauge the caliber of HEIs by examining what their graduates do after graduating. Within two to three years, a tracer study provides feedback to HEIs, enabling them to assess if they are imparting the proper knowledge and skills to their students. Additionally, it informs stakeholders that the HEI is working to advance and meet their needs. According to Romadlon and Arifin (2021), the tracer study contains insightful data on the relationship between higher education and the world of professional jobs, as well as information for stakeholders and the accuracy of the accrediting standards for higher education.

The significance of conducting a tracer study is to evaluate whether there is a need to revise the existing curriculum. Based on the findings, schools may be able to gather information from the graduates necessary for curriculum recalibration.

The present study, therefore, was conducted to trace the graduates of Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) in Early Childhood Education (ECE) offered at the College of Education Graduate Program of Tarlac State University. Since the first batch of graduates in 2014, there has been no tracer study conducted to get feedback on how the education of the graduates had helped them get employed, work effectively and efficiently, and get a promotion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies that trace the employability and professional outcomes of graduates are numerous, and the common purpose is to improve and ensure program relevance. Some of the tracer studies reviewed are discussed below.

A study by Cruz (2024) aimed to trace the graduates of higher education institutions in the Philippines. The findings revealed that graduates had a high employability rate. Most of the graduates applied the skills they acquired from their academic programs to their personal and professional development, particularly those related to career advancement. The graduates recommended expanding the graduate programs offered and upgrading school facilities to further enhance the quality of graduate education. Based on these findings, the study emphasized the importance of regular curriculum reviews and faculty development programs to improve the responsiveness and relevance of academic offerings to students' needs and industry demands.

Similarly, the study conducted by Cornillez, Caminoc, Basas, Militante, and Paler (2021) examined the employability attributes of graduates from teacher preparation programs from 2013–2017. The study investigated the graduates' perceptions regarding the relevance of curriculum learning areas related to employment, and the extent to which they utilized the skills and values acquired during their studies in school. Findings revealed that most respondents had regular or permanent employment status and were employed locally. Graduates were generally hired within one to six months after graduation, with their initial and current positions categorized as professional, technical, and supervisory. The primary reasons for changing jobs were salary and benefits. Furthermore, general education courses and teaching practicum were identified as the most relevant learning areas contributing to employment. Graduates also perceived the curriculum as broad and relevant to workplace demands. Communication, interpersonal skills, and self-confidence were identified as the most useful workplace competencies and values. The study concluded that university preparation significantly contributed to graduates' employment and recommended conducting further studies on additional educational and employability factors not covered in the research.

Moreover, a study by Cagasan, Dargantes, Florentino, and Lasquites (2017) evaluated the employment characteristics, work experiences, and perspectives of graduate degree program alumni from Visayas State University. Findings showed that almost all respondents (99%) were employed, while 84% held regular or permanent positions.

Additionally, 78% were employed in academic institutions or state universities and colleges as faculty members, researchers, extension workers, or administrative staff. About 27% occupied supervisory positions, and 64% received promotions after earning their graduate degrees from VSU. The majority of respondents (92%) perceived their graduate degrees as highly relevant to their current work. Among the competencies acquired, teaching (78%), communication skills (69%), critical thinking skills (63%), problem-solving skills (55%), and human relation skills (52%) were identified as the most beneficial in their professional careers.

The cited studies are similar to the present study because they focused on graduates' employability and the relevance of the competencies acquired from their respective schools. However, the present study differs in that it specifically examined the experiences and perceptions of graduates of the MAEd in ECE program at TSU since 2014.

2.1. Statement of the Problem

The main problem of the study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of graduates of the Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) in Early Childhood Education (ECE) from 2014 to 2020. The findings may serve as valuable input to program recalibration for quality assurance. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the profile of the graduates in terms of:
 - 1.1. Age
 - 1.2. Sex
 - 1.3. Civil Status
 - 1.4. Highest educational attainment
 - 1.5. Year Graduated
 - 1.6. Place of Work
 - 1.7. Nature of employment
 - 1.8. Current Designation
 - 1.9. Employment Status
 - 1.10. Classification of the Job
 - 1.11. Monthly Income
 - 1.12. Subject currently handled?
2. How do the graduates assess the relevance of the acquired competencies from TSU Graduate School to the present jobs of the respondents?
3. What are the achievements of the graduates after completing their master's degree?
4. What are the suggestions of the graduates to enhance the offering of MAED in ECE at TSU?
5. What action plan could be proposed to enhance the offering of MAEd in ECE at TSU?

3. METHOD

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods design in exploring the experiences of graduates of the Master of Arts in Education in Early Childhood Education from 2014 to 2020.

3.2. Research Respondents and Sampling Techniques

The participants of the study were eleven out of 13, or 83.62%, graduates of Master of Arts in Education, majoring in Early Childhood Education at Tarlac State University.

3.3. Research Instruments

The study used a combination of open and closed questionnaires for data gathering. The questionnaire was based on the study conducted by Cruz (2024) and Cornillez et al. (2021), but there were modifications needed to seek answers

to the research problems of the current study. The instrument was validated by three experts for its face validity. Feedback from the experts was integrated into the questionnaire to improve the clarity and organization of the questionnaire items.

Aside from experts' validation, the closed-ended items of the instrument were piloted, and the data were subjected to reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.79, which indicated acceptable internal consistency. The open-ended questions were analyzed thematically.

3.4. Data Gathering Procedure

Data gathering commenced after securing permission to conduct the study from the President of Tarlac State University. The researcher requested the participants to answer the questionnaire through an online Google Form. The questionnaire link was sent to the participants via email. The data-gathering period lasted for two weeks. After the retrieval of responses, the data were tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics for the quantitative data and thematic analysis for the qualitative data.

3.5. Data Analysis

The frequency and percentage were used to organize the data (quantitative) on the profile of the participants. Whereas the data extracted through open-ended questions (qualitative) were analyzed through manual thematic coding analysis.

This process followed three distinct phases as follows: (1) Initial Data Familiarization. Responses were read multiple times to understand the depth of the participants' feedback. (2) Manual Coding. The researcher manually scanned the text, identifying and highlighting identical or highly similar words and phrases used by different participants. (3) Categorization. The initial codes were compared and clustered based on conceptual similarities. The identified themes were reviewed, refined, and interpreted based on the study objectives.

To ensure trustworthiness of the qualitative data, the researcher considered credibility and confirmability. Credibility was established through careful examination and repeated review of the narratives. Dependability was ensured by maintaining consistency in the coding and categorization procedures. Confirmability was observed by basing the interpretations on the actual responses of the participants rather than the researcher's biases. In addition, triangulation of data from both closed-ended and open-ended responses was utilized to strengthen the validity of the findings.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The researcher strictly observed ethical standards in the conduct of research involving human participants. The protocol was submitted to the Tarlac State University Research Ethics Review Committee for review, and the Ethical Clearance was released on March 7, 2025 (Ethical Clearance No. 2024-059). Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the President of TSU.

Furthermore, participation in the study was entirely voluntary. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study without penalty. Likewise, informed consent was secured from all participants before they answered the questionnaire.

The researcher also ensured that the data gathered from the participants were treated with the utmost confidentiality and used solely for academic and research purposes. No personal identifiers were disclosed in the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of data. The data collected through the online Google Form were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher.

Lastly, the researcher used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to assist in language refinement, grammar checking, and manuscript organization. However, all interpretations, analyses, and conclusions of the study remained the sole

responsibility of the researcher. The use of AI complied with ethical standards and did not compromise the integrity, originality, and authenticity of the study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Profile of the Graduates

The data in Table 1 reveal that the majority of the Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) in Early Childhood Education (ECE) graduates were female (72.73%) and belonged to the young adult age group of 25–35 years old (81.82%). In terms of civil status, there was a relatively balanced distribution between married (54.55%) and single (45.45%) graduates. Regarding their educational attainment at the time of study, 45% had completed their master's degree as their highest educational qualification, while others pursued further studies, including those with doctoral units (18.18%) and completed doctoral degrees (27.27%).

In terms of graduation timeline, the majority of the respondents graduated in 2019 (27.27%) and 2020 (36.36%). Regarding employment details, most graduates were regular or permanent Kindergarten and Elementary school teachers employed under the Department of Education (DepEd) in Tarlac, with Teacher III as the most common rank. Consequently, the majority received a monthly salary within the PhP 30,100 to PhP 40,000 range. While most graduates handled kindergarten to elementary grade levels, a few exceptions were noted, including two graduates currently employed at higher educational institutions, one of whom works at a university in Pampanga.

Table 1. Profile of the MAEd in Early Childhood Education Graduates.

Profile	f	%
Gender		
Female	8	72.73
Male	3	27.27
Total	11	100
Age		
25-35	9	81.82
36-45	1	9.09
46-55	1	9.09
Total	11	100
Civil Status		
Single	5	45.45
Married	6	54.55
Total	11	100
Highest Educational Attainment		
Master's Degree	5	45.45
Doctoral Degree Units	2	18.18
Doctoral Degree	3	27.27
Others	1	9.09
Total	11	100
Year Graduated		
2014	1	9.09
2015	0	0
2016	2	18.18
2017	0	0
2018	1	9.09
2019	3	27.27
2020	4	36.36
Total	11	100
Place of Work		
Dau Elementary School	1	9.09
Don Florencio P. Buan Elementary School	1	9.09
Felicidad Magday Elementary School	1	9.09
Gabaldon Elementary School	1	9.09
Holy Angel University	1	9.09

Profile	f	%
Matindeg Elementary School	1	9.09
San Agustin Elementary School	1	9.09
San Vicente Elementary School	1	9.09
Tarlac Agricultural University	3	27.27
Total	11	100
Current Designation		
Teacher III	7	63.64
Master Teacher I	1	9.09
Head Teacher	1	9.09
Asst. Prof. 1	1	9.09
AML Specialist	1	9.09
Total	11	100
Employment Status		
Regular/ Permanent Employed	11	100
Total	11	100
Classification of the Job		
Kindergarten	2	18.18
Elementary Teacher (Grades 1 to 6)	5	45.45
College /University Instructor	2	18.18
Both Elementary and Junior High School	1	9.09
Trading Platform	1	9.09
Total	11	100
Monthly Income		
P 20,100 to 30,000	2	18.18
P 30,100 to 40,000	7	63.64
P 40,100 to 50,000	1	9.09
P 50,000 and above	1	9.09
Total	11	100
Subject Currently Teaching		
All subjects of elementary grades	5	45.45
English	2	18.18
Kindergarten	2	18.18
Araling Panlipunan	1	9.09
Learning Creative Arts, Music	1	9.09
Total	11	100

With respect to current designation, the majority held the rank of Teacher III (63.64%), while others occupied positions such as Master Teacher I, Head Teacher, Assistant Professor I, and AML specialist. All respondents were regular or permanent employees. In terms of job classification, most respondents were employed as elementary teachers handling Grade 1 to 6 (45.45%), followed by kindergarten teachers (18.18%) and college or university instructors (18.18%). One respondent was teaching at both elementary and secondary school levels, while another was working as an AML specialist.

In terms of monthly income, most respondents were earning within the salary range of PhP 30,100 to PhP 40,000 (63.64%). Meanwhile, one respondent earned PhP 40,100 to PhP 50,000 (9.09%), and another earned PhP 50,000 and above (9.09%).

Lastly, regarding subjects currently taught, most respondents handle all subjects in the elementary grades (45.45%), while others specialized in English (18.18%), Kindergarten (18%), Araling Panlipunan (9.09%), and Learning, Creative Arts and Music (9.09%).

4.2. Relevance of Acquired Competencies from Graduate Studies

The respondents were asked to assess the relevance of the skills they acquired in enrolling in the Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The data are shown in Table 2.

Question: Are the competencies you acquired from your graduate studies relevant to your present job? In what ways?

Table 2. Relevance of Acquired Skills.

Participant	Narration	Formulated Theme
Graduate 1	Yes, through pedagogical skills and leadership training learned from the professors and seminars.	Pedagogical and Leadership Competence
Graduate 2	Yes, I utilize/apply all the teaching strategies and pedagogical knowledge I acquired during my graduate-school education in my current role as a kindergarten teacher. I have learned to manage the classroom better.	Pedagogical and Classroom Management Competence
Graduate 3	As a graduate of the Master of Education program majoring in Preschool Education from Tarlac State University (TSU), it has provided me with a wealth of relevant competencies for my roles as both a preschool teacher and now as a Grade 1 teacher. This education helps me to be equipped with a comprehensive skill and knowledge base that greatly enhances my effectiveness in teaching, enabling me to create enriching learning experiences for young children and positively impacting their educational journey.	Professional Growth and Teaching Effectiveness
Graduate 4	Yes, the competencies acquired from TSU Graduate School are relevant to my present job. These competencies have equipped me with a strong foundation in my respective field, enabling me to effectively navigate the challenges and demands of my current roles. The knowledge, skills, and insights I gained from graduate education continue to serve as valuable assets, allowing me to contribute meaningfully to my organizations and excel in my professional endeavors.	Professional Growth and Teaching Effectiveness
Graduate 5	In actual teaching experiences at Holy Angel University, the competencies that I acquired from Graduate School were relevant. The University allowed me to teach at the preschool level, and the administration gave me the freedom to showcase the innate abilities of each preschooler through the utilization of teaching styles and approaches from different proponents of preschool curriculum. The knowledge of the learning and teaching theories and schools of thought deepened my teaching competencies.	Professional Growth and Teaching Effectiveness
Graduate 6	Yes, my master's in early childhood education likely provides a strong foundation for my Grade 1 teaching role, offering insights into child development, effective teaching strategies, and inclusive learning environments.	Inclusive Pedagogical Practice
Graduate 7	As a Grade 6 teacher, I find that the competencies I acquired from TSU Graduate School, especially the theories in handling students, communicating well, and classroom management, are highly relevant to my current job. These theories provide valuable insights and practical strategies that help me effectively manage my classroom, understand student behaviour, and create a conducive learning environment. The leadership skills I gained enabled me to support the attainment of our school goals.	Pedagogical, Leadership, and Classroom Management Competence
Graduate 8	Yes, through the teaching strategies, I became more confident in teaching.	Professional Growth and Teaching Effectiveness
Graduate 9	I have acquired competencies in teaching using different	Inclusive Pedagogical Practice

Participant	Narration	Formulated Theme
	strategies for different kinds of learners.	
Graduate 10	I became a better classroom manager and a leader. I learned various teaching strategies and strategies to handle diverse learners. I also applied my knowledge of inclusion.	Pedagogical, Leadership, and Classroom Management Competence
Graduate 11	I am more inspired to teach because of the learners I had in teaching young learners.	Professional Growth and Teaching Effectiveness

The participants' responses to the question of whether the competencies they acquired were relevant to their present jobs resulted in the development of key themes.

Theme 1. Pedagogical and Leadership Competence.

The participants emphasized that the competencies gained from the graduate program significantly enhanced their pedagogical knowledge and leadership skills. They claimed that the theories, instructional strategies, and academic experiences obtained from their graduate studies provided a strong foundation for their teaching practices and leadership roles in the schools where they are employed. These competencies enabled them to effectively design instruction, facilitate learning, and contribute to school-wide initiatives.

The findings suggest that graduate education plays a critical role in strengthening teachers' instructional expertise while simultaneously developing their leadership capacity. The integration of pedagogical theory and leadership training allows teachers to move beyond classroom instruction and participate more actively in educational decision-making and school improvement processes. The study findings are consistent with the results of Sevim and Akin (2021) that attending graduate studies enhances teachers' pedagogical skills. In addition, Teves and Ubayubay (2024) revealed that a master's degree empowers teachers to become leaders and mentors through strategies that include professional development, praise, recognition, and collaborative decision-making. This implies that earning a graduate degree enables the development of teaching and leadership capabilities. Pursuing advanced studies should then be a priority for teachers to develop competencies necessary in delivering high-quality education.

Theme 2. Professional Growth and Teaching Effectiveness.

Professional growth and teaching effectiveness are another theme generated from the participants' narrative. This shows that graduate education contributed significantly to the participants' professional growth and teaching effectiveness. Graduates expressed that they had gained more confidence, improved instructional performance, and acquired a deeper sense of motivation in teaching. They became more competent and reflective teachers.

Findings suggest that graduate education not only enhances technical teaching skills but also contributes to the personal and professional development of teachers. The findings reinforce the concept that continuous professional development leads to improved teaching effectiveness and a stronger commitment to the teaching profession.

The findings were corroborated by Saleh, Wahyudin, and Darwis (2023), who highlighted that engagement in professional development enhances teachers' mastery of pedagogical competencies, leading to effective management of the learning environment and active engagement of learners in classroom activities.

Theme 3. Pedagogical and Classroom Management Competence.

Another theme emerging from the participants' narratives is "pedagogical and classroom management competence." Participants shared that their graduate education equipped them with strategies for managing student behavior, maintaining classroom discipline, and creating a conducive learning environment. These skills were particularly important in handling diverse learners and addressing behavioral challenges in the classroom.

The participants also highlighted the importance of communication in classroom management. Teachers claimed that effective communication enables the translation of rules into routines; prevents behavioral issues before they start; clear dialogues build trust, lower disruptions; and establishes a supportive environment where students feel safe and motivated to actively engage in learning. This is supported by Sword (2020), who emphasized that communication is essential in implementing effective classroom management.

The results imply that graduate-level training contributes significantly to teachers' ability to maintain effective classroom environments. Strong classroom-management skills are essential in ensuring that instructional goals are achieved and that learners are engaged in meaningful learning experiences. This also highlights the practical value of theoretical knowledge in addressing real classroom situations. As highlighted by Germuth (2018), continuous and integrated professional development helps teachers acquire effective classroom-management skills.

Theme 4. Inclusive Pedagogical Practice.

Finally, participants expressed that attending graduate education develops teachers' competence in inclusive pedagogical skills. Competence in implementing inclusive education is significant, since it aligns with the Department of Education's robust support for integrating learners with disabilities in regular classroom environments. This is enshrined in the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (Republic Act No. 10533).

Graduate education helped the participants in employing effective teaching strategies for learners with diverse needs. This ensures that learning needs are met, learning is optimized, and a supportive educational environment is sustained. This approach supports the enhancement of teaching effectiveness and contributes to positive learning outcomes.

The findings of the present study are similar to the results of the study of Leifler (2020), who found that teachers' attendance at professional development contributes to readiness in modifying the learning environment for enhanced inclusivity. The results highlight the critical importance of pursuing graduate studies in enhancing the competence of teachers in handling learners with diverse needs and in implementing inclusive education.

4.3. Achievements After Completing Graduate Studies

The achievements of the graduates after completing their MAEd in ECE degree were determined. The data are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Professional and Academic Achievements of MAEd in ECE Graduates.

Participant	Narration	Formulated Theme
Graduate 1	I was promoted to a supervisory level.	Career Advancement and Promotion
Graduate 2	Promoted from Teacher I to Teacher III. Best Kindergarten Teacher Implementer, Demonstration Teacher.	Career Advancement and Promotion Professional Awards and Recognition
Graduate 3	Promotion to Master Teacher 1, Salary Increase Tarlac West Central Elementary School Outstanding Kindergarten Teacher (SY 2020-2021) -Tarlac West Central Elementary School Outstanding Teacher III (SY 2021-2022)	Career Advancement and Promotion Professional Awards and Recognition Salary and Financial Incentives
Graduate 4	The specialized skills and knowledge acquired through graduate studies often command higher compensation in the job market, Regional CSC Award for BEST Community PROJECT (Extension, My master's degree opened doors to higher-level positions and greater responsibility within my organization. It qualified me to take leadership roles that require advanced qualifications plus a permanent status.	Career Advancement and Promotion Professional Awards and Recognition
Graduate 5	As a permanent employee, I am entitled to get a 100 % educational discount in Graduate School (my wife) and your children/s (HS-College), Health Care (plus 2 family members), Company Bonus, Rice Allowance, and Summer Pay (April-May). The permanent employees are entitled to apply for ranking and promotion every semester. I have been allowed to apply for this promotion, and I got promoted to Head Teacher I.	Career Advancement and Promotion Professional Awards and Recognition "Incremental Financial Growth Through Career Advancement "
Graduate 6	My salary got increased a little bit.	Career Advancement and Promotion

Participant	Narration	Formulated Theme
	I became the most outstanding Early Childhood Educator in our District. After graduating from MAEd Preschool, I got promoted from Teacher II to Teacher III.	Professional Awards and Recognition “Incremental Financial Growth Through Career Advancement “
Graduate 7	After graduating from MAEd Preschool, I used my degree to achieve a promotion from Teacher 1 to Teacher 3. I became an outstanding ALS teacher in 2018 in the Division of Tarlac City, and I also received an award from the municipality of Concepcion as Outstanding Elementary Teacher in 2023. I became an outstanding ALS teacher in 2018 in the Division of Tarlac City, and I also received an award from the municipality of Concepcion as Outstanding Elementary Teacher in 2023.	Career Advancement and Promotion Professional Awards and Recognition “Growth Through Educational Leadership and Recognition”
Graduate 8	I got promoted after I graduated from my master’s degree.	Career Advancement and Promotion
Graduate 9	My salary increased when I got my classification.	Career Advancement and Promotion Salary and Financial Incentives
Graduate 10	Promotion to higher rank after finishing my MAEd in ECE.	Career Advancement and Promotion
Graduate 11	I got promoted in rank.	Career Advancement and Promotion

As to the benefits of completing graduate studies, the narratives of the participants resulted in the themes below.

4.4. Career Advancement and Promotion

Based on the responses of the participants, they had achieved significant career progression and rank promotions after completing their graduate degrees. Notably, Graduates 4 and 5 experienced substantial advancement by transitioning into supervisory and administrative roles. This trend highlights the direct impact of advanced academic qualifications on professional mobility, demonstrating that graduate studies serve as a significant catalyst for unlocking higher levels of institutional responsibility and leadership.

The result aligns with the study by Walden University (2022), which emphasized that increased compensation and accelerated job-advancement options are among the most distinct advantages of earning a master's degree. Additionally, the findings mirror the results of Cruz (2024) and Sevim and Akin (2021), who revealed that pursuing graduate studies fundamentally drives professional promotion.

Collectively, the data and supporting literature reinforce the principle that advanced knowledge and specialized pedagogical skill sets acquired from graduate school effectively equip educators for leadership. Beyond immediate rank promotion and salary increments, completing a graduate degree fosters long-term career resilience, qualifies educators for permanent institutional security, and secures broader professional recognition within the educational system.

4.5. Professional Awards and Recognition

The second theme generated from the qualitative data focuses on Professional Awards and Recognition received by the graduates (Graduates 2,3,4,6, and 7), following their advanced studies. The narratives showcase substantial institutional and regional accolades. Graduate 2 was named Best Kindergarten Teacher Implementer and Best in Demonstration Teacher; Graduate 3 was recognized as the Tarlac West Central Elementary School Outstanding Kindergarten Teacher for SY 2020-2021 and SY 2021-2022; Graduate 4 received the prestigious Regional Civil Service Commission (CSC) Award for BEST Community PROJECT Extension; Grade 5 was awarded as the most outstanding Head Teacher; Graduate 6 was recognized as most outstanding Early Childhood Educator in their District; and Graduate 7 achieved an outstanding Alternative Learning System (ALS) teacher 2018 in the Division of Tarlac City, and Outstanding elementary Teacher in 2023 for Municipality of Concepcion.

These findings are supported by Pentang et al. (2022), whose tracer study revealed that graduates from advanced studies often manifest a deep passion for teaching, directly translating into professional honors, high employability, and performance milestones.

Ultimately, the findings emphasize the transformative nature of graduate programs. Peer and institutional awards indicate that pursuing advanced studies does not only confer a title; rather, it develops advanced, specialized pedagogical and knowledge competencies that enhance teachers' performance, resulting in high-profile professional recognition and a measurable impact within their respective schools.

4.6. Salary and Financial Incentives

Three graduates (Graduate 3, Graduate 5 and Graduate 9) claimed that completing graduate degree not only promoted them in rank but also increased their salaries. This finding aligns with well-documented correlation between advanced education and improved financial outcomes (Lindley & McIntosh, 2015; Mou, 2023). In addition, graduate studies provide the opportunity for enhanced qualifications, specialized expertise, and leadership skills, making teachers more competitive for higher-ranking positions with greater compensation. As teachers advance in their education, they gain better opportunities for professional recognition and financial reward, underscoring the tangible benefits of investing in further education. Therefore, completing a graduate degree is associated with significant professional and financial advancements. These findings further emphasize the value of advanced education in achieving career progression and improved economic status.

Overall, the findings showed that completing advanced education leads to professional advancement and economic improvement. Hence, ECE teachers should be encouraged to pursue their graduate degrees. As emphasized by Rungduin and Miranda (2018), teachers who are pursuing graduate education should be provided with full support, assistance, and health and wellness programs to help them effectively manage their graduate studies.

4.7. Suggestions of Graduates to Enhance the Offering of MAEd in ECE

Table 4 shows the Suggestions of Graduates to enhance the Offering of MAEd in ECE.

Table 4. Summary of Graduates' Recommendations for Program Enhancement.

Participant	Narration	Formulated Theme
Graduate 1	Optional Practice Teaching for non- Education Degree Holders.	Targeted Practicum Options
Graduate 2	No answer.	None
Graduate 3	The TSU MAEd program is great, and I learned a lot. I hope that more teachers/ instructors will join the Preschool MAEd.	Program Expansion and Promotion
Graduate 4	"Keep up with the newest research and recommended practices in early childhood education. Modify the curriculum to incorporate evidence-based techniques that facilitate children's intellectual, social, and physical growth. Improve curriculum development by carefully examining and adapting it to align with current educational standards and emerging trends in preschool education. By blending different disciplines, incorporating play-centered learning, and using culturally sensitive methods, develop a dynamic and inclusive space for learning. Offer ongoing professional development opportunities and mentorship programs for MAEd students and graduates."	Curriculum Modernization Inclusive and Multidisciplinary Design Mentorship and Continuous Design
Graduate 5	"Investing in teacher training and professional development can have a significant impact on the quality of education that students receive. By providing teachers with the necessary tools and resources, they can create engaging and effective learning experiences that inspire	Instructional Material Enhancement

Participant	Narration	Formulated Theme
	students to become lifelong learners. Additionally, professional development can boost teacher morale and job satisfaction, ultimately leading to a positive impact on the entire education system. High-quality teaching materials and resources can come in various forms, such as textbooks, online resources, multimedia resources, and teaching aids."	
Graduate 6	Regularly updating the curriculum to align with evolving educational trends and Regular feedback mechanisms from students and alumni can also aid in continuous improvement.	Curriculum Modernization
Graduate 7	Given that all professors are well-equipped, I don't have any specific suggestions for further improving the MAEd preschool program.	None
Graduate 8	No answer.	None
Graduate 9	No answer.	None
Graduate 10	No answer.	None
Graduate 11	No answer.	None

4.8. Targeted Practicum Options

The narrative of Graduate 1 highlights a critical curricular need, which is the integration of a targeted practicum or hands-on teaching experience for non-Education degree holders within the TSU MAEd in ECE curriculum. The practical exposure is essential for bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world classroom application, thereby ensuring that career-shifter teachers are fully equipped for the nuances of early childhood education. By embedding structural teaching opportunities within the graduate studies, educators can better navigate classroom challenges, refine their instructional delivery, and optimize student learning outcomes.

This finding aligns with the recommendations of Somosot and Relox (2023), who emphasized that non-education graduates require robust institutional support, specifically from peers and supervisors, to effectively mitigate teaching anxieties, manage diverse learner behaviors, and overcome a lack of foundational instructional resources. Consequently, implementing a targeted practicum within the curriculum serves as a proactive mechanism to build teacher efficacy among non-traditional educators. This suggestion is supported by Mayor (2024), who recommended that enhancing curricular programs for graduate studies needs strengthening experiential learning programs and developing innovative programs for research-based and coursework graduate studies.

4.9. Program Expansion and Promotion

Another theme highlights the value of the MAEd ECE Program while also encouraging increased enrollment and engagement. Graduate 3 suggested that broader participation could further enhance the program. Effective promotion of the MAEd in ECE Program may contribute to improving the quality of ECE by developing competent and highly skilled ECE teachers. By increasing awareness and attracting dedicated individuals to the program, teachers can acquire advanced knowledge, pedagogical competencies, and professional skills that may lead to improved educational practices and learning outcomes in ECE settings. Consequently, the overall effectiveness of ECE may be strengthened, positively influencing children's holistic development. As highlighted by Duraku, Blakaj, Shllaku Likaj, Boci, and Shtylla (2022), completing professional development is associated with a significant increase in teachers' knowledge and skills, work motivation, and self-efficacy.

4.10. Curriculum Modernization

The respondents (Graduate 3 and Graduate 6) suggested the integration of the latest research and evidence-based teaching techniques to enhance the MAEd in ECE program. They also emphasized the need for continuous review and revision of the curriculum to ensure alignment with evolving educational standards and emerging trends

in ECE. This is supported by Chiang (2022), who concluded that evidence-based practice contributes to positive educational outcomes.

Through curriculum modernization, the program may effectively equip ECE teachers with appropriate methodologies and innovative approaches in teaching young learners. As asserted by Nafiu and Olaitan (2025), a thoughtfully implemented instructional technology can support differential learning and cognitive engagement.

4.11. Inclusive and Multidisciplinary Design

Moreover, the respondents suggested the integration of diverse disciplines, play-centered learning, and culturally sensitive methods to enhance the learning experience of the MAEd in ECE students. Since ECE learners come from diverse backgrounds and possess varied abilities, teachers need to be equipped with a variety of approaches that are appropriate for diverse classrooms. Teachers handling ECE classes must be knowledgeable in a wide range of pedagogical skills that cater to diverse learners. This is supported by Sanger (2020), who stated that educators working in diverse settings must proactively integrate students' varied backgrounds, abilities, and interests into teaching and course design because doing so demonstrates both social responsibility and pedagogical effectiveness. As Henry and Namhla (2020) emphasized in their study, teachers should engage in continuous professional development programs that support inclusive education in ECE.

4.12. Instructional Material Enhancement

Graduate 5 reflects the theme "Instructional Material Enhancement" since improving the quality of education is closely related to strengthening both teacher capacity and learning resources. The response indicated that investing in teacher training and professional development equips teachers with the skills to effectively use and maximize various instructional materials such as textbooks, modules, online platforms, multimedia resources, and other teaching materials. Well-trained teachers are more capable of selecting, adapting, and designing appropriate teaching materials that make lessons more engaging and meaningful for learners.

Instructional enhancement is a result of the combined process of human resources development and resource provision. As teachers are exposed to updated training and quality teaching tools, they develop skills in creating more interactive and learner-centered experiences, which ultimately improve student engagement and learning outcomes.

Overall, the findings imply that instructional material enhancement is achieved not only through the availability of resources but also through continuous teacher development that ensures these materials are used effectively in the classroom. As Abad and Hattie (2025) emphasized, teachers' skills in selecting and adapting resources strengthen both instructional design and long-term growth, leading to better learner outcomes.

4.13. Mentorship and Continuous Design

Highlighting the need for ongoing professional development opportunities and mentorship programs to support the growth and effectiveness of MAEd students and graduates was also suggested by Graduate 4. Professional development helps teachers stay current with the latest teaching methods and educational research. Mentorship programs provide valuable guidance and support, offering personalized feedback and career advice that can help educators navigate their professional paths and overcome challenges. These initiatives contribute to making teachers more competent and adaptable, ultimately benefiting the educational system. This finding is supported by Andrews, Hadley, and Hay (2024), who highlighted that effective mentoring training has a direct impact on building collegial and collaborative relationships between mentor and mentee. Likewise, Arnsby, Aspfors, and Jacobsson (2025) underscored the importance of mentorship, since participants showed professional growth in both mentors and mentees due to the content focus, duration, and collaborative nature of the mentor education program. In addition, the cited study revealed that the knowledge and skills acquired through the mentoring program were effectively applied in their individual and collective mentoring, teaching, and collaborative practices.

4.14. Proposed Action Plan to Enhance the Offering of MAEd in ECE

The action plan presented in Table 5 was based on suggestions from the graduates.

Table 5. Program Improvement Action Plan Based on Graduates' Recommendations.

Objective	Strategy	Persons Involved/ Resources	Expected Outcome
To strengthen practical teaching experience of Non- Education Degree Holders.	Incorporate Practice Teaching component in the MAED in ECE curriculum.	Graduate School, Office of the Curriculum and Instruction, Department Head and faculty of MAEd in ECE, Department of Education Partners.	Graduates demonstrate improved teaching competence and application of ECE theories.
To increase enrollment in the MAEd in ECE Program.	Conduct program orientation, alumni engagement activities, and offer flexible learning options.	Graduate School, Office of the Curriculum and Instruction, Department Head and faculty of MAEd in ECE, Department of Education Partners.	Increased enrollees in the MAEd in ECE Program.
To integrate evidence-based practices and trends in ECE.	Implement faculty development programs focused on updated ECE practices and innovations.	Graduate School, Office of the Curriculum and Instruction, Department Head and faculty of MAEd in ECE, Department of Education Partners, external resource speakers.	Curriculum reflects updated, evidence-based ECE practices.
To promote inclusive and multidisciplinary learning environments.	Conduct training on inclusive pedagogy and interdisciplinary teaching approaches.	Graduate School, Office of the Curriculum and Instruction, Department Head and faculty of MAEd in ECE, and Department of Education Partners.	Enhanced inclusive and dynamic learning environment.
To strengthen professional development and mentorship.	Establish formal mentor-mentee system for students and graduates.	Graduate School, Office of the Curriculum and Instruction, Department Head and faculty of MAEd in ECE	Institutionalized mentorship and continuous professional support.
To improve availability of instructional resources.	Benchmark with COE institutions and upgrade teaching and learning resources.	Graduate School, Office of the Curriculum and Instruction, Department Head, and faculty of MAEd in ECE.	Improved access to diverse and effective instructional materials.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study revealed the positive impacts of earning a Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) major in Early Childhood Education (ECE) at the College of Education, Tarlac State University (TSU). Foremost, graduates of the MAEd ECE acquired skills that were highly relevant in effectively fulfilling their roles and responsibilities in their present jobs. The competencies gained by the graduates were found to be relevant in classroom teaching, as reflected in the themes generated: Pedagogical and Leadership Competence, Pedagogical and Classroom Management Competence, Professional Growth and Teaching Effectiveness, Inclusive Pedagogical Practice, Pedagogical, Leadership, and Classroom Management Competence. Moreover, the graduates benefited from completing the MAED in ECE program, as evidenced by the themes: Career Advancement and Promotion, Professional Awards and Recognition, Salary and Financial Incentives, Incremental Financial Growth Through Career Advancement, and Growth Through Educational Leadership and Recognition.

As to the suggestions of the graduates for improving the offering of the MAED in ECE program, the themes formulated were: Targeted Practicum Options, Program Expansion and Promotion, Curriculum Modernization, Inclusive and Multidisciplinary Design, Mentorship and Continuous Design, and Instructional Material Enhancement. The study recommends conducting further research that includes innovative pedagogy and internationalization as variables related to the skills acquired from graduate school. The proposed action plan may also be considered in further improving the MAED in ECE program at TSU. There is great value in ensuring that professors under the MAEd in ECE Program possess advanced skills and up-to-date knowledge of the latest trends and innovations in ECE. Likewise, the management needs to sustain the quality of the program offerings to develop the teaching competencies of preschool and ECE teachers.

The findings imply that the MAEd in ECE program offered at TSU is relevant, responsive, and aligned with quality assurance standards in teacher education. The experiences and perceptions shared by the graduates affirm that the program effectively develops pedagogical, leadership, and professional competencies necessary for Early Childhood Education practice.

6. LIMITATIONS

The study involved 11 out of 13 graduates of the MAEd in Early Childhood Education program from 2014 to 2020, representing 83.62% of the total population of graduates during the specific period. Although the number of participants was relatively small, the study was able to capture the perspectives of the majority of the graduates. However, the findings are limited to the context of the MAEd in ECE program of Tarlac State University and may not be generalized to other graduate programs or institutions. Further studies may include graduates from other universities or related programs to provide broader perspectives and comparative insights.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

Transparency: The author states that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

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