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CONTACT: [Abigirl Mawonedzo-acmaonedzo@gmail.com](mailto:AbigirlMawonedzo-acmaonedzo@gmail.com) & [Philemon Manatsa-philmanatsa@gmail.com](mailto:PhilemonManatsa-philmanatsa@gmail.com)

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The efficacy of teaching practicum during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study of pre-service student teachers in Chitungwiza schools

Abigail Mawonedzo

University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe

Email: acmaonedzo@gmail.com

ORCID Identifier: <https://orcid.org/000-0002-2143-6191>

Philemon Manatsa

University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe

Email: philmanatsa@gmail.com

ORCID Identifier: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7428-3025>

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Abstract

This qualitative case study aimed to evaluate pre-service student teachers' conceptions of the quality of teaching practicum on their preparedness for service. The establishment of teaching practice efficacy under pandemic induced circumstances can inform teacher education on developing new models of supervision. The COVID-19 outbreak around November 2019 created extensive interruption across all human activities. Lockdowns and movement restrictions to curb the spread of the disease had a profound impact on access to education in general, particularly on pre-service student teachers' teaching practice. Focus group discussions and semi-structured individual interviews were used to solicit views from a sample of twenty students attached to two primary schools and six teaching practice lecturers from two primary school training colleges. Data were analysed thematically. The results indicated that pre-service student teachers and the entire education sector were caught unprepared by the sudden demand for online education. The study found infrastructure and human capacity deficit to ensure the provision of quality education effectively. A prolonged absence from the schools meant students could not thoroughly test theoretical knowledge through practice. The study established that pre-service student teachers need support through further training on emerging online teaching and learning technologies after the practicum. Mentors also need urgent in-service training on the use of information communication technologies. Lastly, the government must start developing policies that promote and enhance the availability of support information communication infrastructure. Further research might look into the well-being of pre-service students in a pandemic environment.

Keywords: pre-service students; COVID-19; teaching practice; online education; information communication technologies



Introduction

Disease outbreaks and pandemics throughout history have acted as catalysts for profound economic, political, and societal changes with long-lasting impacts. Huremović (2019) cites examples of recorded eruptions starting with the Biblical ten plagues, the fourteenth-century Black Death, the 1918 Spanish Flu, and recent twenty-first century outbreaks like SARS, Ebola, and Zika. COVID-19, a novel coronavirus pandemic, is the latest affliction affecting the global community. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, a threat to humanity on 11 March 2020. This paper explores the efficacy of teaching practice as a requirement for pre-service student teachers, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The two main objectives of the study were to explore the efficacy as perceived by pre-service student teachers who did their teaching practice at selected schools, and their efficacy based on the quality assurance administration of teaching practice at the same schools. The research focused on a specific case: schools in the Chitungwiza town of Zimbabwe.

Several recent studies that have examined the issue of pandemics include Piret and Boivin (2021); Antràs, Redding, and Hansberg (2020); Akin and Gözel (2020); and Huremović (2019), among others. The treatment in this literature focused on the history, origins, prevention, theory of relationships, modelling, and understanding of the dynamics of pandemics. Large-scale occurrences of infectious diseases that significantly increase morbidity and mortality over a wide geographic area, often resulting in substantial socioeconomic and political disruption, constitute pandemics (Madhav, Oppenheim, Gallivan, Mulembekani, Rubin & Wolfe, 2018). Morens, Gregory, Folkers, and Fauci (2009) add several other characteristics to this definition of pandemics—namely, disease movement, high attack rates and explosiveness, novelty, infectiousness, and contagiousness. Pandemics are recognized for their transformative effects immediately noticeable globally after the first reported case. The WHO declaration of a pandemic compelled governments worldwide to immediately adopt and implement guidelines to prevent the contagion from spreading. The literature shows studies on the effects of pandemics on different sectors (Hall, Scott & Gossling, 2020), the impact on tourism, government, industry and consumer response (Liang, Ooi & Wang, 2020), medical training (Spielman, 2021; Onyema, Eucheria, Obafemi, Sen, Atonye, Sharma & Alsayed, 2020), and education (Kalloo, Mitchell & Kamalodeen, 2020; Tria, 2020). The conclusion from these inquiries was that the pandemic had

adverse effects that were felt across all sectors of human endeavours.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Zimbabwe, like any other country, adopted mitigatory measures including enforcing a complete lockdown, mandatory mask wearing, sanitisation, and social distancing as recommended by the WHO and local health experts. All educational institutions were abruptly evacuated and public gatherings were banned. The development had serious ramifications for the education system, particularly pre-service student teachers already on teaching practice (TP) under the 3-3-3 teacher education model (Maguraushe, 2015; University of Zimbabwe Scheme of Association Handbook, 2015). The unscheduled school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic posed inimitable *assessment* challenges for teaching practice (TP). Teacher education is a niche area for the Faculty of Education at the University of Zimbabwe. Candidates enrolling at thirteen associate primary school teacher training colleges spend the first year in residence learning foundations of education, teaching methods, educational media, and technology and subject specialization. During the second year, students are deployed to schools for attachment teaching practice (ATP), practicum, or work-integrated learning (WIL). Teaching practice is a practical component performed in classrooms. In the last year they return to college to complete the theoretical elements of the teacher education course and write examinations as part of the requirements of the 3-3-3 model. Guidelines for the role of the universities, colleges, and schools are set in *The Scheme of Association Handbook for Quality Assurance for Associate Teachers' Colleges 2015*.

Schools are the pre-service student teachers' future professional working environment, the real world of classrooms and learners (Moyo, 2020; Jackson, Rowbottom & McLaren, 2017; Flores, 2017). The schools are real-life specific contexts within which perceptions about teaching self-efficacy are formed and modified through interaction with learners and their problems, community expectations, and professional demands. Teaching practice is a critical assessment component of the teacher's professional development (Ngara, Ngwarai & Ngara, 2013; Danner 2014). When the pandemic broke out, the restrictions on movement and gatherings jeopardized scheduled examinations within the scheme of the association. Ballantyne (2007) reports that trainee student teachers valued school placement more than their theoretical studies. Perceived student teachers' self-efficacy can explain the value attached to teaching practice; a construct from Bandura's social cognitive theory reflecting individual belief about "their capabilities to organise and execute the course



of action required to produce given attainment” (Bandura, 1977, 3). The contention is that efficacy beliefs are a major basis for action (Bandura, 1997).

The importance of pre-service student teacher beliefs about their own competencies calls for attention in the context of teaching practice experiences under COVID-19 circumstances. The scale of this occurrence had never been experienced in modern history. Through a social constructivist paradigm, the study acknowledges the role of the individual in constructing meaning (Creswell, 2009). An important position of this theory is the recognition of the quest to ‘understand the world’ of work and everyday life through the eyes of those involved (Creswell, 2009). Wiggins (2007) posits that knowledge is a human construct—we know the world through the lens of our own experiences. Determining students’ confidence levels to accomplish learning tasks during teaching practice can inform the development of relevant and appropriate strategies and pedagogical techniques, particularly when there are abrupt changes in the social order.

The experiences students gained during the pandemic outbreak could richly inform teacher education if adequately examined. The COVID-19 pandemic induced massive disruption of educational programs. The effects were experienced by institutions, educators, students, teachers, learners, parents, and other stakeholders in education (Onyema et al., 2020). Atkins and Danley (2020) posit that teacher education programmes had to adapt the curriculum to a virtual format, while engaging students in conversations on how to solve problems during a pandemic or crisis. This case set out to learn and develop insight into students’ experiences of the situation on the ground. Research conclusions have revealed that high self-efficacy is closely related to work independently and self-regulate a learning process (Akcaoglu & Akcaoglu, 2022; Putarek & Pavlin-Bernardić, 2020; Busch, 1996). Self-directed learning skills are a prerequisite to the professional growth of students (Nasri, 2019). Pre-service student teachers’ perceptions of self-efficacy therefore affected the quality of teaching practice learning experiences. The events brought about by the COVID-19 outbreak impacted the global community and hence became an important factor in the teacher education discourse. The need for change in the provision of education was imperative.

Statement of the problem

Teaching practice is one of the most crucial examinable components of teacher

development contributing to a wholesome teacher product (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). It presents opportunities to bridge the gap between teacher preparation processes and the realities of the classroom environment. Theory and practice are put to the test within a specific school context. However, teaching practice experienced sudden insurmountable obstacles like reduced contact time and movement restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The disruptions made it difficult for pre-service teachers to effectively experience the school context. Education was disrupted by the unexpected unscheduled closure of schools as a measure to reduce the risk of transmission of the coronavirus. Traditional education environments were abandoned in all primary, secondary, and higher education institutions. However, the education and training of teachers continued through distance and digital education platforms. Neil and Marais (2020) highlight pre-service teachers' use of WhatsApp to explain subject content to school children during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explored the efficacy of teaching practice for pre-service student teachers and quality assurance mechanisms in a suddenly altered, unfamiliar teaching-learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper sought to explore the abrupt adjustment from traditional to online or virtual approaches of supervision and evaluation of students on teaching practice.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- 1) What are pre-service student teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of their teaching practice during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) How do pre-service student teachers perceive the quality of school and college supervision during the crisis?

Methodology

This qualitative study design focused on pre-service primary student teachers' perceptions of the efficacy and quality of teaching practice and their supervision in selected schools in Chitungwiza, a residential town thirty kilometres east of Harare. The design was preferred because it allowed the researchers to focus on pre-service student teachers as key players affected by the pandemic. A unique context of the unfolding



pandemic needed understanding: an important role of case study. Case studies enable the examination of a social unit of an institution in a given context to understand it better (Best & Khan, 1993). Case(s) often focus on an in-depth exploration of an activity, event, process, or program bound by time (Creswell, 2009). Schools are real-life contexts for pre-service student teachers to gain experience. The researchers wanted to understand and describe pre-service student teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of teaching practice under unusual circumstances. The study also evaluated lecturers' strategies for quality teaching practicum administration and supervision during the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who could provide vital information for the study. According to Creswell (2014), purposive sampling allows the researcher to gather qualitative responses, which leads to better insights and more precise research results. The sampling technique allowed for the selection of individuals with relevant data (Creswell, 2014). The participants included twenty second-year pre-service student teachers on attachment teaching practice (ATP) and an equal number of mentors, all stationed at the selected two primary schools.

Six lecturers from two primary school teacher education colleges were added to the sample of participants. A total of forty-six participants were involved in the study. Focus group discussions and semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to solicit views from the participants. Two focus group discussion sessions lasting an hour and thirty minutes were undertaken. One focus group was for ten mentors and the other one for the ten pre-service teachers from each of the selected schools. Focus groups were used since they allow for the exchange of ideas among participants, and this could lead to a deeper understanding and more comprehensive insights into the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2009). Interviews were administered to the six lecturers to get an in-depth understanding of their perceptions of teaching practice during the pandemic (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured guiding questions to prompt responses from the participants were raised and recorded on an Android cell phone. Two experts validated the interview questions in research from one of the institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. William-McBean (2019) emphasizes the value of testing interview questions and adjusting the interview guide accordingly before starting the real study. A written transcript of the answers was produced. The interpretive study analysis was applied to code and categorize the data. Data analysis involved selecting the categories and relating them to other categories integrated to generate meaning

and understanding, involving the description of relationships, actions, and events and the intervention of the pre-service student teachers. The researchers thematically analysed the data from the interviews and focus group transcripts. During thematic analysis, the researchers examined the data to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that came up repeatedly (Caulfield, 2022).

Cloutier and Ravasi (2021) refer to trustworthiness as the extent to which the researcher can convince the readers that the findings are worth paying attention to. The researchers ensured credibility by using member checks by offering participants an opportunity to read the transcripts to ascertain whether they were a true reflection of their responses. For confirmability, the researchers used detailed descriptions and quotes from interviews and focus groups to demonstrate how they arrived at the findings (Thomson & Crowther, 2022). Ethical procedures which highlighted confidentiality, informed consent of the participants, and their right to withdraw from participation at any stage without facing any consequences were adhered to (Creswell, 2014). For ethical reasons colleges were identified with letters A and B.

Methodology

This section integrates the findings and discussion of both instruments. Sentiments from the participants revealed four major themes. These were challenges in teaching practice supervision, contact time, assessment of professional documents, and school-based supervision.

Theme I: TP supervision challenges

Conducting online distance learning provided benefits like increased awareness of the need to master emerging technologies and overcome problems of educational provision during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the literature on teaching practice during the pandemic, Maphosa (2021) and Onyema et al. (2020) reached a similar conclusion regarding the professional growth of students. However, supervision remained a challenge for the teacher colleges. Traditionally, supervision of student teachers on teaching practice has been conducted through conventional methods (Marzano, Frontier & Livingstone, 2011; Moyo, 2020). Supervisors would routinely visit schools to meet student teachers face-to-face and assess their professional



development concerning lesson preparation and delivery, record keeping, and other competencies related to the learning process. The problem of orthodox supervision came to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moyo (2020) describes the situation as an assessment conundrum. Teaching and learning suddenly had to shift to online or virtual classrooms. Students had to work from home. Conventional supervision, therefore, became impossible with the unavailability of classes. However, lecturers in charge of teaching practice indicated that assessment and supervision had to continue. This was despite the pandemic and the restrictions it brought. One lecturer in charge reiterated that:

Although we had a challenge due to Covid-19, our student teachers are supposed to be learning so that they gain experience. It is difficult to assess their lessons physically but we are guiding them through WhatsApp messaging groups. However, we had challenges with online supervision because we could not afford to hold Google Meet with our students. Some of our students, even the college, could not afford the data bundles to consult and offer guidance during this pandemic.

College and school supervisors are obligated to carry out a formative evaluation of student competencies as laid down in *The Scheme of Association Handbook for Quality Assurance for Associate Teachers' Colleges 2015*. Satisfactory completion of the practicum is an examination requirement and a quality assurance tool in preparing and developing future teachers (Moyo, 2020; Mavundutse, Luthuli, Dube & Chivore, 2014). Movement constraints and class rotation were obstacles that prevented the effective supervision of student teachers.

Mentor absenteeism was noticeable. Failure to report for duty every day meant mentees lacked experienced role models to learn from. Students were left in charge of the whole class to monitor and teach. The lecturer in charge from College A reported that:

Absenteeism was a challenge to both student teachers and mentors. Some mentors cited many reasons such as fear of COVID-19, incapacitation, health issues and so on. You could find that mentorship was compromised in one way or the other during COVID-19. Besides mentors, some students could also not be found at their stations because of fear of COVID-19.

A lecturer from College B weighed with the comment:

To counter some of the challenges that students were facing due Covid-19 and absenteeism the TP office resorted to online lectures for students who were on teaching

practice for guidance and help in areas where mentors had been unable to take charge. We also encouraged our students to use group WhatsApp messaging to consult their lecturers since they were not getting enough supervision and mentorship during COVID-19.

Literature on mentoring emphasizes quality of mentoring for student teachers (Fish, 2012), the growth of professional knowledge (Furlong, & Maynard, 2012), and student and mentor perceptions of each other's role (Shumba, Shumba & Mapolisa, 2012; Mudavanhu & Majoni, 2003). The transition from traditional teaching to online classrooms versus mentor-student relationships and the demand for digital skills are subjects for further investigation. From the focus groups, mentors and students indicated that they felt isolated since lecturers could not visit them.

Theme 2: Contact time

Contact time for student teachers with learners was compromised upon the pandemic outbreak. The number of school days for each week was reduced. Chitungwiza schools introduced a rotation model. The model combines traditional instruction and online classrooms (Christensen, 2013; Staker & Horn, 2012). Learners started to alternate attendance days to cater for social distancing as a requirement under COVID-19 protocols. The consequences of lost schooling time might remain obscure, but certain learners suffered some skills development setbacks. Against this background assessment procedures and demands as laid out in the contract had to be met. Reporting for school was set at a maximum of three and a minimum of two days or one, depending on the grade. A disruption of the time schedule had implications on how much content and subjects were likely to receive attention. An explanation from one lecturer from college A was as follows:

Contact time for student teachers and learners was little because students would report to school at a maximum of 3 days per week and in some cases 2 days. So, you would find, if a student is attached to such classes, which were affected his/her contact time was compromised. This was experienced in many schools. In some cases, lecturers resorted to asking students to teach the class, which was present at the time of the visit.

During the supervision visits, supervisors found that some student teachers did not find their learners in class. The learners would be absent from school. In such scenarios, student teachers were asked to find any similar grade available to deliver lessons for observation purposes. A lecturer from College B summarized this position



with the following comments:

Most of the time when supervisors visited schools, they found some students teachers without learners at the school and, in such scenarios, student teachers were asked to teach learners from other classes as long as they were of the same grade.

However, this arrangement posed challenges as student teachers could not meet expectations. The teacher and learners were not comfortable with each other, as ad hoc arrangements were made for the convenience of supervision requirements. The management of teaching and learning was noticeably subject to constant readjustment. Classroom management is one critical competency out of many that students should begin to develop during teaching practice. The ability to manage a class presents students with time to focus on developing teaching skills rather than focusing on discipline. In literature, student competencies in terms of teaching skills and classroom management have been a subject of inquiry (Darling-Hammond, 2020; Urbani, Roshandel, Michaels & Truesdell, 2017).

Time management was an issue too. Mentors were unable to adhere to the timetable. There was a tendency to concentrate on subjects regarded as more important than others. The role of mentors in the development of teachers has attracted some research over time (Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba, 2007; Mudavanhu & Majoni, 2003). The general position is that mentors play a critical role in developing student teachers' professional understanding. One lecturer from college B reiterated that:

Time management was a challenge in most schools. This came to light when we visited our student teachers. We would find them teaching a different subject from the one on the timetable most of the time. When we get to the schools, we ask for a timetable because we would like the student to teach as slotted on the timetable. The student would say, no, I am teaching this subject because the mentor has taught this. You know such cases, eech, so time management was not managed properly as shown on the timetable. We got that anomaly.

Regarding time, one student had this to say:

It was [a] struggle to teach. There was not enough time to teach. At first, it was hard. We were not used to standing in front of learners but, as time went on, we got used.

A comment directed at the impact of the pandemic showed concern about the course duration— as one pre-service teacher said:

The length of the course was too long. For example, learners came back having forgotten what they had learnt. We had to start again.

Given the changes in contact time, students had to learn new time management tactics to see them achieve the same results as those in a traditional setup. Students assumed responsibility for their own learning, a characteristic of self-directed learning. Khalid et al. (2020) describe other features of self-directed learning as mastery of self, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and working independently, among others. Their focus still demanded the development of essential teaching competencies and, above that, digital skills that would be in line with technology-driven pedagogies like virtual reality and ChatGPT.

Theme 3: Assessment of professional documents

The purpose of teaching practice supervision is to assist student teachers with scheming and planning their lessons, preparing proper delivery of lessons and learning materials, lesson evaluation, and classroom management. The concern is that supervision is carried out to ensure effective teaching and learning, following quality assurance guidelines.

The study found that college lecturers opted for document-based supervision and assessment of student teachers. The reason is that student teachers had to have a particular number of supervision reports as required by policy. Document-based TP supervision was not feasible since lecturers could not visit schools (Moyo, 2020; Mavundutse et al., 2014; Maphosa et al., 2007). Observation of actual teaching will indicate student mastery of specific classroom skills like questioning, motivation, content mastery, and others. TP supervision and assessment are guided by an assessment instrument stipulating specific competencies for student teachers to develop their teaching skills. Documents do not provide an eyewitness account of the teaching process. For example, questioning, motivation, and reinforcement techniques among teaching approaches are omitted. In fact, once documents are prepared, no changes are made—for example, in the scheme of work. Assessment of documents consists of a scrutiny of files, schemes of work, daily lesson plans and evaluations, learners' exercise books, and record books. Documents only contribute a fraction of the competencies a student teacher should demonstrate. Accordingly, the assessment focuses on all competencies.

As an explanation for this option, a lecturer from college A expressed that:

To boost our number of supervision crits as a college, we resorted to assessing students'



documents. In fact, we generated a crit for each student when we observed that most of the students had only one crit for term 1, term 2 and term 3. That supervision report assisted us in boosting our number of supervision reports for the students because of COVID-19.

This mode of supervision in this case did not meet the quality assurance benchmarks. The thrust was on producing a specific number of reports for a student as a requirement at the expense of efficacy. In another study, Poulou (2007) explored the sources of self-efficacy and found that self-perceptions of this factor contributed to student actions and, as such, student feedback could inform the evaluation and improvement of teacher education

Theme 4: School-based supervision

The findings revealed that school-based supervisors gave grades that did not reflect the comments made about the student teacher's performance. For example, grades were proportionally higher than the comments about students' performance. One student said:

Yes, we were supervised by our mentors even during Covid-19 but, umm, but most of them gave us very good marks. Yah, they were very high marks but with a lot of comments that made us wonder if the marks were real or not.

Another student commented:

I liked the comments very much because they were very constructive. You could actually see the areas where you were legging behind and that guided us a lot. I concentrated more on the comment section in order to prepare myself for the next supervision.

This phenomenon highlights a mismatch between supervision and assessment. The approach compromises assessment procedures, making them less credible. Supervisors' role is to offer professional guidance for developing self-directed learning skills and competencies that would allow effective functioning in the classroom (Anumaka, 2016; Ngara et al., 2013; Maphosa et al., 2007). The finding shows that assessing students' competencies during practicum remains problematic: often marks awarded did not match the comments written by supervisors. Student teachers indicated that step-by-step guidance was helpful as a platform to receive productive criticism. Positive comments by college lecturers and mentors were constructive.

It was established that instructional and content-related comments guided what

needed to be re-examined and how it could be done. However, negative comments were considered discouraging. Mentors are expected to provide enriching experiences that student teachers need to progress and develop through regular feedback. Students' perceptions of the role of mentors have been examined in some studies (Podsén & Denmark, 2013; Maphosa et al., 2007; Mudavanhu & Majoni, 2003). During COVID-19, mentors did not have time to discuss areas of weakness. As supervisors, mentors are expected to observe students' lesson preparation and delivery, including developing their intrapersonal skills as members of the profession. Mentors ought to offer students advice on how to improve their teaching skills.

In this study, a different dimension was raised by mentors who observed that COVID-19 changed the way student teachers adopted the use of technology in their teaching. Before the pandemic the application of technology in the process of teaching and learning was piecemeal. One mentor expressed that:

Our student teachers quickly adopted the use of technology in the teaching and learning of our learners. We want to admit that they were far ahead of us and that helped a lot during Covid-19 because our learners did not lose that much as homework was done and sent to the teacher for marking using WhatsApp messaging.

Learners who had smartphones were benefitting immensely through work posted on WhatsApp by student teachers. Study material could be easily accessed anywhere at any time. Another mentor made this observation:

Student teachers had a rich opportunity to adapt to the virtual learning teaching methods. Some of them actually assisted us as mentors to find solutions to enable our learners to learn and provide them with the distance learning experience.

Previous studies have examined integrating technology into teaching and learning (Ertmer, 2005; Starcic & Bagon, 2014; Zinyemba, Nhongo & Zinyemba, 2021). Technology has now taken centre stage in steering development in almost all sectors of human activity. However, this implies complete migration from face-to-face interaction, particularly for learners in the early years of schooling and those responsible for their development. At the start, there was student reluctance to integrate technology into teaching and learning before the pandemic. However, once the pandemic altered the conditions, students had to reconsider teaching online. One report by a student was that a non-governmental organisation had supplied enough ICT solar-powered gadgets for a class of 45 learners. The student commented:

Learners are able to learn online. The college had prepared us to teach using ICT skills,



and I can interact with learners. Learners can save their work.

Supervision assists student teachers in isolating specific elements of their practice that may need constant attention and refinement. Self-efficacy beliefs give individuals confidence in achieving desirable outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Pre-service students receiving genuine feedback on their progress develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The students confirmed this and alluded to the challenges of standing in front of learners, but eventually gaining confidence over time. The pandemic brought about the need to examine and quickly adjust to pedagogical approaches blending technology to address new teaching challenges. In most cases young student teachers adapted to technology faster than mentors. This leads to question issues of relevance of mentoring where students assumed the role of mentor's staff, developing their supervisors on ICT skills.

The findings of this study revealed that student teachers felt teaching practice presented a contextual opportunity to experience the school environment. Experience gained from the exercise includes basic teaching competencies, motivation, pedagogical preferences, self-confidence, and the use of media and technology (Ismail & Jarrah, 2019; Özdaş, 2018). Data from focus group discussions and interviews showed that students, mentors, and lecturers acknowledged the adverse effects of the pandemic on the efficacy of their teaching practice. Students' reactions to unfolding disruptions indicated reservations about the efficacy of their teaching practice. The pandemic raised anxiety as well as stress as a result of prolonged school closure. The findings also revealed that both student teachers and mentors had varied experiences during COVID-19. These experiences have several implications for teacher preparation, especially regarding their clinical expertise. Student-teacher responses reflected inequity across the group as it relates to the quality and comprehensiveness of the experience during school closures and the pandemic. Some student teachers could participate fully in the transition using online platforms. However, some students were not able to fully participate as they faced challenges due to data bundles and a lack of ICT gadgets to use during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Those student teachers who could not remain engaged had a much more negative perception of their student teaching experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic with its disruptive impact on education called for urgent mitigatory measures to ensure that pre-service student teachers continued with their teaching practicum. The findings that emerged from the study were

that student teachers, mentors, and lecturers experienced supervision challenges during this period. Contact time for student teachers with learners and mentors was limited and assessment of professional documents was augmented by school-based supervision. While there was an adjustment to online and virtual teaching, the availability of gadgets and support infrastructure was inadequate. As a reaction to the issue of unprecedented teaching practice environment students developed self-directed learning through the pragmatic application of problem-solving skills within the pandemic context. Students' reactions to the challenges were an indication of self-efficacy through a social constructivist lens.

Limitations of the study

There are more than a few limitations to this study that might limit its generalizability. Data were collected from only a few lecturers—two out of fifteen primary education colleges. However, lecturers and their students had a chance to experience teaching practice, hampered by challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic which affected some students to the extent that teaching practice had to be postponed. Their perceptions of teaching and learning under the circumstances bear similarities that could inform us about alternative strategies that were used to manage the context. It is possible that these participants had characteristics that were meaningfully different from their counterparts in different contexts. It might be prudent that this research be replicated in other settings using mixed methods or quantitative research, particularly with lecturer and student samples from all the primary colleges to validate the generalizability of the findings. Inherent limitations found in case studies can introduce bias, emanating from previous interactions between researchers and lecturers. Therefore, the incorporation of alternative research methods should be carried out to explore the relationships identified in our results further.

Suggestions for future research

The findings of this study provide an opportunity for other researchers to look at how teacher colleges and schools can implement educator preparation programmes that enhance the use of technological resources and related pedagogical strategies. The new educational landscape brings a new definition to the fore: that of the



digital learner concept. Future teachers must be prepared with digital and virtual self-directed learning and teaching skills to develop the confidence to teach learners through multiple platforms. Further research might investigate the well-being of pre-service students in a pandemic environment. Also, future studies might want to assess the impact of the disruption on the development of learner skills. This might help the researchers understand the developmental process of pre-service teachers' teaching practice efficacy in various contexts. Investigation to develop and corroborate such case studies would benefit researchers and teacher educators keen to design, develop, and evaluate the ever-changing learning environments.

Recommendations

From the study, it is recommended that, after the practicum, pre-service student teachers be given support through further training on emerging online teaching and learning technologies as drivers of future educational interaction. Adopting technology-based pedagogies calls for serious consideration in the teacher education curriculum. Colleges must move swiftly to ensure that students are well-prepared to function in virtual classrooms by reviewing their curriculum. Lecturers and mentors need urgent in-service training and retooling information communication technologies, and improved digital literacy as a functional skill. The study also recommends the exploration of alternative modes of teaching practice supervision to ensure work preparedness of graduating students. Government must start developing policies that promote and enhance the availability of support information communication infrastructure to enable convenience in the provision of education regardless of location. Accessibility, cost of gadgets, and data bundles require regulation to stimulate progress in educational provision.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to evaluate pre-service student teachers' conceptions of the quality of teaching practicum and their preparedness for service. The findings revealed that supervision of students was a challenge for the teachers colleges. Movement constraints and class rotation were obstacles that prevented effective supervision of students. Contact time with learners became limited during the pandemic outbreak as

schools resorted to new models of managing teaching and learning. Learners alternated attendance days to cater for social distancing and reduced class sizes as required under COVID-19 protocols. Skills development setbacks were experienced by both learners and student teachers. Time management became an issue as mentors prioritized subjects like Mathematics, English, and content that are examinable at the end of the primary school course. College lecturers opted for document-based supervision and assessment to meet the required number of supervision reports as recommended by the policy. School-based supervision grades did not reflect comments on students' performance. Researchers concluded that the teaching practicum during COVID-19 had adverse effects on student teachers, learners, mentors, and colleges. Student teachers were able to adopt the use of online lessons and virtual pedagogies which assisted in the management of the curriculum. A major implication on teacher education is to rethink new skills sets that take into account the role of information communication technologies in teacher development. Students must be prepared for self-directed learning in abruptly changing teaching and learning contexts. Recommendations are that the government must start developing policies that promote and enhance the availability of support information communication infrastructure. Accessibility, cost of gadgets, and data bundles require regulation to enhance progress in educational provision.

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