Triumphs and Tribulations of Teaching Practicum Experiences: Reflections from Preservice Teachers in UAE

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Successi e sofferenze nelle esperienze di tirocinio all'insegnamento: riflessioni degli insegnanti in formazione pre-servizio negli Emirati Arabi Uniti

The 'Practicum-3' preservice teachers are those who are in their 3rd year of their degree studies and have prior teaching experience. The intent of this qualitative paper is to assess the challenges experienced by the preservice teachers and the tactics used by them to manage these challenges, during their first week of teaching practice. The challenges reported herein were thematically analysed after extrapolating from the participants' narratives and presented within the context of the Gibbs' Reflective Cycle. Findings from this study reveal that there are several factors within and outside the control of the student teacher that affect the practicum experience. Further, the preservice teacher's preparedness and emotional disposition significantly influence discharge of the duty. In the same vein, the mentor-mentee relations contribute a lot in making or breaking the practicum experience for student teachers in the UAE. The findings recommend further explorative assessments of the situation and necessary policy corrections in the preservice teacher education.

Gli insegnanti in formazione pre-servizio 'Practicum-3' sono studenti al terzo anno del corso di laurea e hanno precedenti esperienze di insegnamento. L'intento di questo articolo qualitativo è quello di valutare le sfide vissute dagli insegnanti in formazione pre-servizio e le tattiche che utilizzano per gestirle durante la prima settimana di insegnamento. Le sfide qui riportate sono state analizzate tematicamente dopo essere state estrapolate dalle narrazioni dei partecipanti e presentate nel contesto del ciclo della riflessività di Gibbs. I risultati di questo studio rivelano che diversi fattori impattano sull'esperienza di tirocinio, sia al di dentro sia al di fuori del controllo che può esercitare l'insegnante-studente. Inoltre, la preparazione e la disposizione emotiva dell'insegnante in formazione pre-servizio influenzano in modo significativo lo svolgimento della mansione. Analogamente, le relazioni mentore-allievo contribuiscono molto nel comporre o incrinare l'esperienza di tirocinio dei futuri insegnanti negli Emirati Arabi Uniti. I risultati suggeriscono ulteriori valutazioni esplorative della situazione e necessari adeguamenti delle politiche relative alla formazione pre-servizio degli insegnanti.

Keywords: Preservice teachers; Gibbs' reflective cycle; Practicum; Teacher training; Pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

The process of skilling and preparing the preservice teachers with requisite attributes relies a lot on the teaching practicum (TP). It is one of the key and crucial elements of teacher training that completes the eligibility of a teacher (Köksal & Genç, 2019; Kadir & Aziz, 2020). In the practicum phase, the teacher candidate is given an opportunity to step into the real world of teaching and hence, it is also called as the work integrated learning (Kadir & Aziz, 2020; Jenna & Deanna, 2020). This is the time when the prospective teachers gain insight on the art of teaching, which prepare them for joining the teaching field (Makura & Zireva, 2011). During this training, the preservice teachers are expected to apply their theoretical knowledge in real schools and classroom settings (Köksal & Genç, 2019). This period is characterized by different types of challenges for the preservice teacher because as the teacher-in making steps into the classroom, not only their strengths are being tested, but also their weaknesses are also being exposed (Russell, 2005; Almazroa, 2020). What is significant in this process is, the preservice teachers will learn from all those positive and negative experiences. Therefore, the widely accepted measure of success in a teachers' training program is when the preservice teachers show the ability to cope with the multiplicity of challenges and also learn from them (van der Schaaf, Slof, Boven, & de Jong, 2019; Alkilani & Al Shaer, 2021).

Success of the practicum experience relies on several factors. There are some factors within the control of the preservice teacher, some are in the scope of the mentor-mentee relationship and some are posed in the environment of the practicum settings (Ismail & Jarrah, 2019; Almazroa, 2020). Management of such factors (the good and the bad) become the building blocks from which success is built. The process of making the best teachers we have today is built from such lived experiences. Lived experiences become building blocks and a good teacher is expected to learn from them. The experiences naturally leave lasting impressions in the memories of the teaching folk particularly (Tuli & File, 2010; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016). Knowing the possible pitfalls in the pedagogic journey and ways to overcome these difficulties will assist preservice teachers to sharpen their teaching skills. The present study therefore analysed and catalogued student-teacher reported challenges and positive experiences during their first weeks of teaching practice.

2. Context of the study and review of literature

The issues and challenges associated with the TP program is multifaceted. Some of the factors influencing the successful culmination of the TP are within the control of the preservice teachers whereas some are not. Some of these factors include emotional, inadequacy of theoretical knowledge, socio-cultural, mentor-related and technology-related challenges are studied and discussed previously (Nguyen, 2020). Therefore, the underdiscussed areas are also explored here, along with the important factors.

2.1. Teaching Practicum – practical evaluation of pedagogical content

The teaching practicum (TP) is a compulsory and major component of teacher training in most countries (Vo, Pang, & Kean Wah, 2018; Kadir & Aziz, 2021). The TP functions as the induction phase of teacher training in which theory is put into practice (Kadir & Aziz, 2021). The prospective teacher gains first-hand experience of testing the effectiveness of the theoretical pedagogical knowledge in real classroom settings and to experience the real classroom atmosphere (Köksal & Genç, 2019; Kosar, 2021). Thus, theoretical knowledge on its own is regarded as an inadequate parameter to define a good teacher.

Prior to being deployed for TP, the preservice teacher is exposed to the theories, methodology and techniques of teaching. On TP deployment, the practical evaluation of this knowledge is done using real life learners, in real classrooms and real schools. According to Nguyen and Baldauf (2010) the TP is a time when the truth finally dawns on the student teacher. The prospective teacher would realise the adequacy or inadequacy of what they were taught in theoretical classes and starts to understand the teaching processes to a better extent. In some cases, they would realise that what they were taught is not connected to the reality on the ground (Nguyen & Baldauf, 2010). This mismatch between what prevails on the ground and text-book information provide profound insights on what it means to be

a teacher in real situations. The experienced reality allows the preservice teacher to experience what teaching entails from the standpoint of the teacher, not of the student (Kosar, 2021).

The teaching practicum content varies depending on the country or university or college, which provides the teacher training. For instance, in Vietnam, the student teacher gets acquainted with educational practice, roles of a teacher, practice teaching and prepare final internship report (Vo *et al.*, 2018). This involves instructional planning, observing, developing lesson plans and conducting real lessons (Nguyen, 2014). Though there are differences in the teacher training programs based on the socio-cultural and economic requirements of the teacher training institutes involved, the assessments on the performance of student teachers on practicum placement is usually done on the basis of the key areas mentioned above. This is aligned with Faggioli's (2011) study that points to two major categories that characterize experience training as a situated, adaptive process on the one hand, and closely linked to unanticipated interactions between experts and novice non - specialists on the other. These connections appear to have value within a paradoxical situation where participants' expectations of improving the workplace are unavoidably alienated. These components raise additional important queries. He suggests these two components should be linked and connected.

2.2. Emotional turmoil of the practicum experience

The TP program has always been on the nerve of all teacher training programs. The successful completion of the TP is regarded as one of the success indicators of the program in most countries (Köksal & Genç, 2019). In that regard, expectations are always high on the part of the prospective teacher. High expectations also come from the training university or college, the program supervisors, the mentors, and the learners themselves. In view of that, the TP becomes a nerve wrecking experience as the prospective teacher is thrown into the deep to practice teaching in real life settings. It is with in anticipation of such emotional challenges that in Australia some universities have an affiliated mentor who besides administrative and academic duties offer emotional support for the prospective teacher (Jenna & Deanna, 2020). Several factors contribute to the emotional turmoil that the student teacher goes through on TP. Some of the factors are within the student teacher while others are within the training processes.

It is during TP that the student teacher realises that what they were taught to be ideal may not be in tandem with reality on the ground. The TP phase is described as a 'reality shock' as the student teacher is made to realise the inadequacy of the taught theory, methodology and or techniques (Kramer cited in Köksal and Genç, 2019). According to Köksal and Genç (2019) this in part explains the mixed feelings, confusion, stress and fear among the preservice teachers on TP. Therefore, what is written in TP student assessments may not be a correct reflection of the performance of the preservice teacher, but it may reflect the teacher training processes.

The emotional challenges go with it being a new experience for the student teacher and also because of the assessments that go with the phase. Assessments usually follow from the mentor, school personnel and or from the teacher training college or university. A study conducted in Turkey indicates that the highest source of stress among student teachers came from supervisors and mentors (Mahmoudia & Özkan, 2016). Some of the revealed sources of stress for the student teacher include, time management, relationships, pedagogy and assessments (Paker, 2011; Mahmoudia & Özkan, 2016) Stress is a negative outcome that is associated with anger, dissatisfaction, anxiety or depression (Kyriacou cited in Mahmoudia & Özkan, 2016). The significance of exploring stress-related negative outcomes and sources of stress is that coping strategies can be designed in order to improve teaching practice. Emotional stress or anxiety among the student teachers has been attributed to content mastery on the part of the student teacher. In a qualitative study conducted in Turkey, Köksal & Genç (2019) reveal that stress and anxiety among the student teachers was attributed to feelings of inadequacy because the students felt they were not adequately trained in the teaching subjects. Conversely, mastery of subject content strengthens efficacy beliefs allowing the student to be confident (Tschannen-Moran *et al.*, cited in Rupp & Becker, 2021).

2.3.   Mentorship and mentoring relationship dynamics

Student teachers on teaching practicum get to interact with the established teachers for mentoring. The goal of mentoring is to assist mentees to develop into proper teaching practitioners in real contexts (Maunganidze, 2015). It is a multidimensional process in which the knowledge, skills and experience of the mentor are transferred to the mentee (Petrovska, Sivevska, Popeska, & Buncheva, 2018). The process entails that the mentor facilitates the transition from studies to practice through competence transference. Research on the practicum experience indicates several challenges that affect this critical and cardinal phase of teacher training (Makura & Zireva, 2011; Vo *et al.*, 2018). Some of the challenges emanate from clash of expectations or they are relationship-based challenges between mentor and mentee, training college versus school and mentee (Duman & Erdamar, 2018).

In the process of mentoring, the mentee is expected to observe and learn (Maunganidze, 2015) while the mentor is to lead and guide (Koki, 1997). A lot is expected from the mentor who is also called the cooperating teacher. The cooperating teacher is expected to provide encouragement in the form of feedback, teaching related support, instructional support and emotional support (Rupp & Becker, 2021). This entails that the mentor-mentee relationship needs to be reciprocal and amicable to be beneficial, differences in terms of expectations or personalities are bound to lead to relational challenges that affect the mentoring process.

In a qualitative study conducted in the Vietnam, some student teachers were caught in between what they were taught versus what the mentor expected (Vo *et al.*, 2018). An example of areas of mismatch is when the mentor teaching approaches are focused on the final examination of the learners (facilitating high test scores) which may not go together with the pedagogical theories taught at the university (Vo *et al.*, 2018). The lack of clear communication strategies or fragmented or inconsistent communication between college and school is bound to negatively impact the teacher training program (Maunganidze, 2018). This study by Maunganidze (2018) in Zimbabwe revealed that the mentoring process is being affected by dialoguing and attitude challenges. When mentoring support is affected, it results in the failure of TP to meet the intended goals. Even in online teaching, clear communication lines are regarded as essential between the teachers and the learners (Özkanal, Yüksel, & Uysal, 2020). Success of the practicum experience is also dependent on the relations established by the student teacher. Important relations for the student teacher include with, mentors, school administrators, learners and university or teacher training college. Even though this relationship is critical for the student teacher research indicates several challenges that disrupt teacher training. A study by Makura and Zireva (2011) reveals that some mentors working with school heads in Zimbabwe sometimes abuse student teachers through verbal, sexual aggression and intimidation. The aforementioned scenario is very serious because it not only affects the quality of the teacher training, but also affects the mental health of the preservice teacher.

2.4.   Technological integration

Technology is widely being accepted in teaching and learning processes. The use of technology enhances the processes. Technology advances are ongoing and failure to quickly adopt may result in the teacher being irrelevant. The use of ICT communication became more critical due to the face of challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many in education were not prepared for the changes that had to be adopted to accommodate the integration of online teaching for example. While many value the essence of utilizing digital technology there is not much preparation and experience on the part of the student teacher through virtual teaching practicum (Sepúlveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). The virtual teaching practicum is meant to prepare the student teacher to integrate digital technology in teaching and learning. However, many in education appear not ready to accommodate the drastic changes such as the adoption of online teaching. This may explain the absence of the virtual teaching practicum in several teacher training institutions (Sepúlveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). The challenge may also be attributed to intergenerational incongruence. According to Maunganidze (2018) mentoring and teaching is a different phase from what they received during their own training. The mentor in this regard may lack the requisite skills to assist in the adaptation of technology in teaching and learning.

From the review of literature, it is clear that studies on the challenges faced by the practicum 3 preservice teachers in the UAE context are rare. It is abundantly clear that additional research is required

to give empirical information about the ground experiences and difficulties uniquely encountered in the UAE. Unlike Australian scenario, where emotional support to the preservice teachers are available (Jenna & Deanna, 2020), there is no provision for emotional support to the preservice teachers in the UAE. This scenario needs special attention. Therefore, the present study is intended to address the research question: What are the emotional, technical and relational challenges experienced by practicum 3 preservice teachers, during their first week of teaching practice in the UAE?

3.   Methods: design, participants and ethical statement

The study was carried out in the Faculty of Education of a federal university in the UAE.

The college's field experience program model consists of four cumulative levels: Practicum 1, Practicum 2, Practicum 3, and Internship. During Practicum 1, trainee teachers shadow their mentor teachers while they teach in early childhood settings. In Practicum 2, trainee teachers start giving small classes and reading aloud sessions. During Practicum 3, trainee teachers assist, teach mini-classes, and begin teaching whole-class lessons. Internship happens on every school day for 10 consecutive weeks and trainee teachers will be required to adopt a more prominent teacher role since they will be teaching complete lessons.

The present study used the qualitative analysis method to envision the emotional as well as other challenges faced by the preservice teachers of the UAE as well as the means used by them to overcome these challenges. Participants were randomly drawn from third year preservice teachers doing their teaching practicum in the UAE, after obtaining their written informed consent. All the personal identification possibilities of the participants were masked using the coding system. In total, 20 practicum 3 preservice teachers were selected for this study, whom provided written informed consent. Our study analysed and catalogued preservice teacher reported challenges and the means they used to overcome these challenges during their first weeks of teaching practice as reflected in their journal entries/narratives. The challenges reported herein were thematically analysed after extrapolating from the candidates' journal content/narratives and presented within the context of the Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988).

Data was collected using journal entries/narratives. This data collection tool was selected as it is compatible with a qualitative study where participants have to provide information according to their subjective views (Creswell, 2012; Fraenkel *et al.*, 2015). Data was analysed inductively to identify themes. Researchers analysed data manually by first and foremost organising it, coding it using different colours, collapsing the codes into three main themes (Creswell, 2012) and discussing each theme in detail. The three themes (Communication challenges, Anxious, sad and nervous and Subject content) are aligned with the critical research questions set to be explored in this study.

4.   Results

The findings of the data analysed showed three main themes. The first one was related to communication challenges faced by the preservice teachers with their mentors. This finding shed light on a very important part of their experience where lack or weak communication hinders a positive experience and leads to frustration. The second theme highlighted how anxious, sad and nervous the preservice teachers were during this experience, it might be due to the nature of online teaching as it is their first time. Third theme focused more on the difficulty of the subjects taught given that the program they studied focused more on pedagogy rather than content. The below gives a fuller understanding of the themes.

4.1.   Communication challenges

Good and effective communication is viewed as essential for the success of the teaching practicum (Maunganidze, 2018; Koki, 1997; Petrovska *et al.*, 2018). Consistent and effective communication is expected between the mentor and the student teacher. It is through clear channels of communication that the general and specific work competencies of the mentor are transferred to the mentee (Petrovska *et al.*, 2018). In the current study communication between the mentees and the mentor was not always

consistent and effective which affected the student teacher. Student candidate SSP felt that she and her mentor did not connect as her mentor was not responding to any of her massages. She complained that until "my mentor didn't make that good connection with me, I emailed her on Sunday, and she didn't reply to me until Tuesday." Mentors should be always available to their mentees to ensure that they are comfortable and making progress on their practical. The presence of the mentor is essential as they are expected not only to guide the student teacher but also to emotionally support, encourage and professionally support the student teacher (Rupp & Becker, 2021). The presence of the mentor facilitates the passing of knowledge, skills and experience of the mentor to the mentee (Petrovska *et al.*, 2018).

A related communication challenge, perhaps stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic related to mentor-mentee communication. Candidates SMP and SSP reported communication challenges with their mentors. SMP regretted her failure to talk to the mentor directly but through email. SSP claimed that her mentor didn't make that good communication with her "I emailed her on Sunday, and she didn't reply to me until Tuesday, that makes me feel disappointed because she promised to contact me via WhatsApp." Such an impersonal platform was perceived as a challenge by the candidates.

Conversely, when there are clear communication strategies between the mentor and mentee, positive outcomes are expected. The process allows the passing on of skills and experiences in real contexts (Maunganidze, 2018). AAP submitted that she and

> my mentor and I, discussed the effective instructional strategies that could help teach math to grade four students. We shared our thoughts and opinion. My mentor explained to me her teaching methods and showed me the devices she is using to give her lessons.

The mentor in this case qualifies to be called the "cooperating teacher" as she is present to provide personal and professional support (Rupp & Becker, 2021).

Various Artificial Intelligence (AI) based technologies and research have evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic and made virtual teaching easier (Nurhasan, Prahani, Suprapto, & Al Ardha, 2022). However, the virtual platform as a communication channel also posed challenges to the preservice teacher on teaching practicum. This is especially significant with regards to the teachers of Arab origin. A comparative study between the teachers from the Arab origin and Jewish origin by Masry-Herzallah (2022) showed that the teachers of Arab origin taught less synchronously, as compared to Jewish teachers. Similarly, our study also presents its fair share and unique communication related challenges of virtual platforms, as reported by candidate LAP. The candidate indicated that she struggled "to catch up with the students' names and discriminate between their sounds." She went on to submit that she "felt a bit left out because I was only hearing their voices without knowing who is talking." In this respect, the virtual platform acted as a communication barrier. The gap may be attributed to lack of preparation and experience on the part of the student teacher through virtual teaching practicum (Sepúlveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). The college fails to provide the requisite virtual teaching training skills before practicum placements. According to most teachers, they were not prepared for online teaching and technological integration in the processes (Kadir & Aziz, 2021). This in turn affects the personal and professional development of the student teacher

4.2. Anxious, sad and nervous

Some preservice teachers on teaching practicum reported being nervous, sad and anxious. Such outcomes are associated with stress (Kyriacou cited in Mahmoudia & Özkan, 2016). This is understandable given that this was their first time. Teacher candidate AOP, said "I was nervous because it was my first time in online teaching." This implies that she did not have prior teaching experience. She probably was used to face to face, teaching. Online teaching might have triggered a feeling of uneasiness. Mastery of subject content was identified as a factor that could explain the emotional disposition of the student teacher. Mastery of subject content is associated with self-efficacy (Rupp & Becker, 2021). Preservice teacher candidate AAP was however more direct in explaining her nervous feeling. This reportedly stemmed from her being given a subject that she was not an expert in, she explained:

> once I knew that I will be teaching math to grade four students I became anxious and nervous. I thought that teaching math to grade four students would be stressful and intricate

experience as I have to teach them in English. Besides that, I believe that math should be taught by someone who has a deep understanding of its content.

AAP's experience gives one the impression that you can't expect a student teacher to teach something she doesn't understand. This affects the confidence of the student teacher because there is a correlation between self-efficacy and confidence (Rupp & Becker, 2021). One could question what exactly she would be teaching in such situation.

Regarding sadness AHP, felt sad because she wanted to see the students and not teach them virtually. To illustrate her point, she averred:

> I was feeling sad because I like to communicate with children face to face. I think it is much better than just hearing their voice from behind screens." Candidate AOP's sadness was compounded by the mentor after the later failed to introduce him to the class. Said AOP "finishing my class without introducing me, make me feel disappointed."

Maslow's (1943) third level in the hierarchy of needs (love and belonging) shows that human beings strive for recognition. It is this need that AHP was denied by the mentor resulting in him getting sad and disappointed. AHP's experience emphasises Faggioli's (2011) findings that there must be a more meaningful connection between preservice teachers and mentors. AOP's experience was diametrically opposite to that of candidate SAP whose mentor she said, "introduced me to the students saying Miss Shamma."

4.3. Subject content

While the preceding challenges are people related, candidate LAP reported a subject content related matter. The candidate said he "faced difficulties in understanding the lesson's content, causing her to have a problem in catching up with the learning material that learners are engaged with." Mastery of subject's content is closely related to higher self-efficacy among the student teachers (Rupp & Becker, 2021). A similar challenge was reported by candidate JSP who noted that the mentor had challenges pronouncing students' names during the teaching of English. Said JSP "she barely can pronounce the students' names." This scenario caused her to be 'confused.' Issues of pronunciation are critical in imparting linguistic skills and proficiency. Hence, JSP saw the mentor's shortcomings as negatively impacting on the pedagogic process.

5. Discussion

On being deployed for teaching practicum, the student teacher takes with him/ her own strengths and weaknesses to the field. Furthermore, the student teacher encounters some challenges that are posed within the school, mentor and system as a whole. Their theoretical information is tested in real classroom situations. This study reveals that though theoretical support is there, they just provide a general guideline. There are several areas of mismatch between theory and practice in real classrooms (Nguyen & Baldauf, 2010). The hallmark of a good teacher is one who takes both the positive and the negative incidents in their classroom life as building blocks in for building their career.

Being deployed for TP could be nerve wrecking, as reported by participants that they become nervous, sad or anxious. Such feelings are associated with stress (Köksal & Genç, 2019). The student teacher develops mixed feelings attributed to stress. The mismatch between theory and practice also contributes to the fear, confusion and anxiety that in turn contribute to stress. Though the feelings are normal, they affect the discharge of duty by the novice teacher. The study reveals that some of the student teachers were not adequately prepared for online teaching. Some also faced challenges on the use of technology. What is significant is to learn from such experiences.

The success of teaching practicum relies a lot on the mentor-mentee relationship. The mentor is an important resource for the student teacher as they are expected to share knowledge, skills and experience (Petrovska et al., 2018). The mentor is supposed to be available and reachable for support and transfer knowledge, experience and skills transfer. In situations where the mentor is unreachable either

through email or on social media platforms results in frustration on the part of the student teacher. It also becomes a source of stress for the student teacher affecting performance (Mahmoudia & Özkan, 2016). The respondents of this study also pointed out that total lack or delayed communication from the mentors hinder their performance and a positive experience. At present, the communication is mainly through WhatsApp or E-mail, which are 'private' modes of communication. There is no way the authorities can monitor or modulate these communications. A possible solution for this issue is to make an App, which is exclusive for the practicum program. Since there is adequate funding for pedagogy in UAE, there are no issues in developing specialised communication apps or platforms for improving the communication between the mentor and mentees. Such apps may be used by the mentees for making professional queries to the mentors. Meanwhile, such apps will enable the authorities to monitor the delays in communication or lack communication from the mentors. If any such lapses were monitored, the mentors may be provided additional training and guidelines for improvement. Integration of discussion platforms for the preservice teachers and mentors to such apps can solve professional issues to a great extent. In such discussion platforms, both the mentees and mentors can get additional practical guidance and tips from other mentors and mentees. Such discussion forums can significantly improve the professional competencies through reducing the gap between theory and practice. Similarly, daily, or at least weekly 'one-on-one' meetings between the mentors and mentees shall be made compulsory, because during such meetings the mentors can provide substantial practical and emotional support to the mentees.

We observed that those student teachers who nurtured good communication with their mentors reported positive outcomes. They received guidance on practical issues such as instructional strategies. It follows that it is also the responsibility of the mentee to nurture positive relations as they help build the teacher.

Conflicting communication and approaches from the university and from the mentor is also identified as a source of frustrations for novice teachers on teaching practicum (Patrick, 2013). Some of the lecturer supervisors may not be in touch with prevailing situations in the schools. Their expectations may be at variance with the mentor's expectations leading to conflicts of expectations. Fragmented and inconsistent communication between the training college and school is bound to negatively impact the teacher training program (Maunganidze, 2018). In such cases, the mentees may be provided with a detailed information regarding the common challenges they may have to tackle and targets they have to fulfil. In addition, the mentees will not have unrealistic expectations regarding the program. Similarly, the mentors may be informed about what they are supposed to deliver, including the professional and emotional support to the mentees. By doing so, both mentors and mentees expectations and preparation (mental preparation and professional preparation) for carrying out the program can be optimised.

The mastery of subject content and technology use is one key aspect that assists the student teacher to fare better in the teaching practicum. Student teachers who lacked mastery in subject content and the use of technology lacked confidence in delivering their lessons were bound not to do well and faced frustrations. Frustrations in turn affect performance. Frustrations in turn affected their performance. In the modern era of digital learning, technology education to the preservice teachers, including those from specialisations other than science, must be made compulsory. Conversely, mastery of subject content contributes to self-efficacy on the part of the student teacher. This makes the call by Sepúlveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020) to fuse virtual teaching in the trainings. This would come in handy in unforeseen challenges such as those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Conclusion

In summation, we believe that the student teachers' experiences and performance during practicum is largely determined by how their mentors implement pedagogic routine. In this paper, we reported on the challenges experienced by mentees only. The challenges stemmed chiefly from human interactions. Despite these challenges, most candidates loved their teaching experiences particularly the relational ones i.e., those dealing with how their mentors treated them. This is a positive take home; a very professional posture; one that is extremely necessary for their professional teaching development. Since stress-related challenges are reported by many of the participants of this study, we suggest the policy makers of

the education to implement the idea of providing emotional support to the preservice teachers using the service of qualified persons. We also recommend that the policy makers of the UAE education department should make necessary measures to rectify the pitfalls reported in this article, in order to improve the teacher training program in the UAE.

This paper's strength comes from the fact that it focuses on a new subject and offers ideas and implications that are useful and may be applied to improve students' virtual field experiences all over the world. Further research can employ quantitative methods and concentrate on both commercial and governmental entities. The prejudice of the researchers in this study is one of its limitations.

The investigation was carried out by the researchers using their own software. Despite the fact that this is acknowledged as a constraint, it is important to stress that the research's quality was not affected because high standards of professionalism and honesty were upheld all throughout. Another drawback is the infrastructural problems, technological difficulties, and restricted access to internet services that come with online teaching and learning. These difficulties are faced by certain students, which may limit their capacity to take full advantage of online learning.

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