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Teacher Candidates’ Perception of Their First Week School Placement: Comparison Between Online and Face-To-Face Practicum Learnings and Challenges

Introduction. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the pre-service teachers’ education system because the need for social distancing forced pedagogies to shift the mode of practicum from face-to-face to online spaces. It was noticed that studies highlighting the differences in the pre-service teachers’ perceptions about the online and face-to-face modes of practicum are rare in the UAE context. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the differences between learning outcomes and challenges of pre-service teachers, who have enrolled in face-to-face practicum and those who did online practicum.

Study participants and methods. After obtaining the written informed consent, a sample of 20 pre-service teachers (10 from online and 10 face-to-face practicum) from the UAE was selected. The data was collected from the participants in the form of qualitative answers in essay format, after the first week of the practicum. The data analysis was performed using the thematic analysis method.

Results. The findings show that face-to-face practicum is superior to online practicum in terms of observation and practice-based learnings for skills like classroom management, student-engagement and teaching customization and differentiation. This superiority was mainly due to the lack of proper tools in online classroom management and to achieve person-to-person interactions. The curriculum plan was also more suited to face-to-face teaching. The non-cooperation of the mentors is the common challenge faced by pre-service teachers from both face-to-face and online groups. This study highlights the need for developing proper tools to enhance the online practicum and to improve the personal interactions. Need for improving the mentors’ involvement in practicum is also underscored.

Practical significance. This study explored the differences in efficacy between the online and face-to-face practicum and the challenges faced by the pre-service teachers during the first week of their practicum in the UAE context. The results of this study highlight the areas of concern in both online and face-to-face mode, which can be used by the policy makers in the UAE to improve the teacher education programs.

Keywords: online teaching, school placement, teacher education, internship, pre-service teachers, classroom management, perceptions

For Reference:
Introduction

The onset of COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 enforced drastic changes in the teaching platforms. Due to the lockdown, educational institutions were compelled to shift from the requirement of being physically present in the classroom in face-to-face teaching mode to online classes, in which no personal interactions were possible. The scenario was similar in the UAE education sector as well. Though the teachers were not prepared or under-prepared for online education and suffered to maintain the same quality of teaching through online platforms [1; 2]. This scenario compelled the teachers to be technology driven, more patient, and also improve their own understanding of content. Only 57% of the participating students in a study conducted in the Saudi Arabia had the perception that technical tools were able to cover all their educational needs during the online learning [3]. Though a minor portion of modernised educational institutions had the tools/technology background to implement online teaching [4], many institutions, in-service teachers, and students, who had no previous training in online teaching platforms suffered to meet the requirements [5].

Pre-service teachers are the most badly affected, because of the lack of adequate experience in teaching. The COVID-19 pandemic not only impacted upon pre-service teachers’ education, but also the need for social distancing forced pedagogies to shift the practicum to online spaces. Even with the re-opening of the schools, there has been a continued trend to enlist both offline and online or hybrid methods of teaching and field-experience for first time teachers [6]. The pre-service teachers are now exposed to the online methods of teaching, and have to navigate through not only the traditional teaching and learning challenges, but also the challenges that may be brought about by the physical separation of the students and mentors.

In a recent study, Jin (2022) explored the preservice teachers' online teaching experiences and the challenges they faced during the online teaching [7]. Using the constant comparative method, they assessed the tools used by the pre-service teachers for their practicum. This research work showed that, during online teaching, the preservice teachers do not have proper control over the children's learning processes and they were unable to engage the students to their learning process. Similarly, a study from Indonesia [8] explored the preparedness of pre-service teachers for online teaching. The researcher used a Differential Item Functioning (DIF) analysis method to evaluate the preparedness of 285 pre-service teachers and their engagement in online teaching platforms based on their gender and age. Their findings show that the Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia rushed the authorities to change the platform to online, though the pre-service teachers were not prepared for online teaching and learning. Furthermore, only 12% of the pre-service teachers were adequately engaged in online learning. Similarly, Erumit et al. (2021) reports that the pre-service teachers, who teach science are the most badly affected, due to the transition from face-to-face to online learning [9]. This scenario is due to the pre-requisite that science education needs more teacher-student personal interactions and hands-on practical sections. The pre-service teachers participated in the aforementioned study were not fully accustomed to the online mode and expressed a lot of anxiety. Furthermore, majority
of the participant pre-service teachers narrated limitations and challenges, including the difficulty in comprehending online courses that involve math and equations, difficulty of practical training in science, the lack of healthy interactions in online education, and not being familiar with online education. This study concluded that majority of the participant pre-service teachers in the science and science education field have the opinion: ‘Face-to-face instruction offers more opportunities for hands-on learning’.

In support of the above-mentioned works, a study by White and McSharry (2021) also narrates how badly the sudden shift of teaching paradigms affected the pre-service teachers [10]. This study conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown at an Irish University during described that the sudden transition from face-to-face mode to online was problematic for the education itself. This chaotic pivot to virtual communication resulted in the destabilisation of the educational frameworks, which normally provide consistency. This sudden change inflicted pre-service teachers with a feeling of ‘in betweenness’, and the authors suggest that this change challenged the process of ‘identity formation’ among the pre-service teachers in the Irish University they studied.

Each country has unique education systems accounting for its’ socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, the education system in the UAE has to account for its’ ‘global classrooms’, which have students from different countries, cultures, religions and languages [11]. Implication culturally inappropriate education models in the UAE, such as those from the USA, may become a burden for the teachers as well as the students. Therefore, the curricula of UAE should include culturally responsive elements to account for the needs of ethnically diverse students in the region [12]. Therefore, the perceptions and challenges of the teachers of UAE regarding online teaching practices may be different from that of other countries [13]. In an attempt to address the aforementioned subject area, Hojeij and Baroudi (2021) studied the virtual field experiences of the pre-service teachers in UAE [14]. This research work evaluated how the pre-service teachers perceived their online practicum training during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that though the pre-service teachers had concerns about virtual practicum in the beginning, they were able to adjust fast and started enjoying the new experience. The pre-service teachers regarded virtual field experience as good tool, which can help them to improve professionally as well as personally.

Since most studies have been undertaken in the context of the Western countries, and there is a gap in literature when it comes to the UAE context. This study, therefore aims to fill this gap through analysing the perceptions of the pre-service teachers about their online as well as face-to-face practicum experiences, with an emphasis on the challenges faced by them during the first week of their practicum.

**Literature Review**

Practicum or field-experience is an essential aspect of teacher training, as the pre-service teachers get to experience working with real students, and can apply their learnt pedagogies in the real world-setting. However, techniques for generalizing the teaching skills must be included in the teacher preparation curriculum to enable the pre-service teachers to generalize their newly acquired skills. When the curriculum lacked modules
for generalization the pre-service teachers showed disconnect between theory and classroom realities [15; 16]. This disconnect will be visualised and can be corrected during the practicum. While working closely with mentors, the practicum setting gives adequate opportunity to the pre-service teachers to learn from their mentors and develop their interpersonal skills [17].

There is very little research that is available in the context of the learnings or challenges faced by the pre-service teachers during their practicum, more specifically with their online practicum. However, research works are now emerging on the challenges faced by the pre-service teachers and the adoption strategies employed by pre-service teachers during their online practicum. For example, Nasri et al., (2020) explored the challenges faced by the preservice teachers of Malaysian public university during COVID-19 inflicted lockdown. They reported that pre-service teachers who were undertaking their field-experience through online platform, found it difficult to assess students, or implement traditional teaching methodologies. Also, this study reported that there are pedagogic conflicts as pre-service teachers’ technological knowledge is limited and which may impact on the successful conduction of online classes. However, the university as well as many of the pre-service teachers participated in this study managed to achieve satisfactory outcomes with the help of coping mechanisms like student-content interaction, and student–lecturer interaction, which were achieved through the university’s learning management system (LMS) [18].

However, pre-service teachers from the undeveloped and under-developed nations suffered due to the lack of infrastructure and tools for online teaching. Further, Kosar (2021) have reported that pre-service teachers in online field-experience training did not believe that the online mode prepared them for their future career. They perceived that the online mode of teaching cannot provide the benefits that they could have obtained through face-to-face training [19]. One of the reasons for this pre-service teachers’ failure to develop professionally could be the inadequacy of in-person interactions with their mentor in online mode. Further, in online mode of practicum, the pre-service teachers don’t have the chance to observe how the mentors and co-operating teachers manage the classroom and prepare the lesson plans. Studies have provided evidence to support the aforesaid points. For instance, a study by Hojeij and Baroudi (2021) revealed the potent role played by mentors in facilitating online practicum for the pre-service teachers [20]. The vital role of mentors in the successful culmination of the pre-service teachers’ training has been reported previously in both face-to-face field experience and in virtual field experience [21; 22].

Some of the documented claims around advantages, in general, of online learning are that it affords better flexibility, better time-management, and reduces costs [23]. However, online learning is also found to have some disadvantages, mostly in the form of technological problems – lack of access to the internet or other devices used in e-learning, due to income or regional inequalities [24]. Studies have also highlighted the problems specific to the impersonal nature of the online medium [25] that leads to lack of communication, lack of implementation of teaching methodologies [26] and lack of accountability and lack of adequate student interaction among peers or with mentors [27]. The above studies are however conducted in the context of the learning of students or the recipients of teachings, though, they may still apply to pre-service teachers getting trained during their online practicum. Nevertheless, there continues to exist a lack of literature that evaluates and
explores the pre-service teachers’ experiences across their practicum or compares their online and face-to-face practicum experiences regarding their skill acquisitions or challenges.

From the review of literature, it is clear that there are only few research works evaluating the challenges faced by pre-service teachers during their online practicum in the UAE. Further, comparative studies exploring the pre-service teachers’ experiences during online practicum with that of face-to-face practicum is also lacking. To be precise, except for the studies conducted by Hojeij and Baroudi (2021) and Baroudi and Hojeij (2022), there are no studies that have focused on evaluating the experiences of the pre-service teachers in their online practicum, or compared the pre-service teachers’ experiences between online and offline practicum [20; 28]. As mentioned previously, the socio-economic and cultural differences of UAE classrooms can make the pre-service teachers’ challenges during online practicum in the UAE different from that of the West. Therefore, such studies are required in the UAE context as well to help the educational policy makers in the UAE. Therefore, the present study assessed whether there are any differences in the learning and challenges of the pre-service teachers in the UAE during their first week of face-to-face and online practicum. The present study also tried to understand the ways by which pre-service teachers in the UAE improve their performance after their first week of face-to-face and online practicum. Therefore, we explored the perceptions of the pre-service teachers in the UAE about their learning and challenges in their first week of face-to-face and online practicum.

Methodology

This research employed a phenomenological research design to explore the perceptions of the pre-service teachers and to capture the rich, contextual and subjective perceptions [29]. The research was undertaken at a college of Education of a University in the UAE. Twenty pre-service teachers were selected through purposive sampling technique, as the study was concentrated to a single college that had a limited number of pre-service teachers enrolled for the practicum. Since the research was comparative in nature, we selected 20 pre-service teachers – 10 from online and 10 virtual field-experience, for the comparative study. A sample size of 20 has been found suitable for qualitative research, as it allows for capturing diversified opinions without getting repetitive [30]. The present research work was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) and Institutional Review Board (IRB). Also, important ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent from the participants, ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and safety were ensured. The participants were asked to fill their responses after the first week in school, which were coded and analysed using a manual thematic analysis approach method, that involved reading the responses independently for each candidate, then together for each question, coding for similarities and then developing broad themes [31]. The data was collected from the participants in the form of qualitative answers in essay format, after the first week of the practicum because the first week of the practicum is the most challenging period for a pre-service teacher in real-life teaching. During the qualitative method of essay writing, the participants answered three questions given in [Appendix A].
Results

Through thematic analysis of the gathered data, the following themes were generated. The themes were grouped into 1) Findings from the face-to-face classes and 2) Findings from the online classes.

Findings from the Face-to-face Classes

Theme 1: Acquisition of Class Management Skills and Student Engagement Skills

The first week at school was reported as interesting by the pre-service teachers, and they mentioned learning new things through observation of how the mentors’ planned the classes and interacted with the students. At the end of the week, they felt confident that they had understood the importance and application of planning and managing the classrooms. Response from the Participant 5 highlights the above:

“I learnt a lot by observing my mentor teacher...I saw how she managed the students and what strategies she was using to manage the class.”

Also, similar responses were reported from other participants as well, for example, Participant 1: “I learnt to use various strategies that make the classroom more manageable, and students behave, follow the rules, and participate more.”

Theme 2: Acquisition of Skills for developing Lesson-Plans and Successfully Implementing Them

The pre-service teachers reported learning about lesson-plans and implementing them; by helping their mentors design and plan classroom activities, and then learning by observation as well as practice.

For example, Participant 2 mentioned that, “I was helping the students with their art activities, and I followed the mentors’ approach of gently assisting individual students,”

Also, Participant 10, noted, “I helped my mentor develop the lesson plan and then I helped the students complete their activity in which they have to practice writing their names.”

Theme 3: Acquisition of Insights into individual students’ behaviours and their weaknesses

Another theme that emerged was that they acquired the skills to capture insights from the students’ behaviour. They were able to understand, by observing the students, their weaknesses and strengths. Also, by watching the mentors interact with the students, the pre-service teachers of the students acquired the essential skills of guiding the students and encouraging them to use their strengths and overcome their limitations. See the following excerpts:

Participant 1: “I have taken notes about students who have weaknesses.”

Participant 4: “I also knew the student’s level, strengths and weaknesses. Finally, I learned some of the students’ names.”

Participant 9: “I would say my achievement during this week is getting to know the students by knowing their names and trying to know their personality and their differences as it will help me in the following remaining weeks.”

Theme 4: Learning to bond with the students

The participants reported learning to bond with the students, and were able to build a good and friendly relationship with the students. For example, Participant 10 stated that, “I
learnt to keep having high expectations of children, be positive while talking to the students, and this way, I developed a good relationship with them.”

Similarly, Participant 2 elaborated: “I learn to make the students more comfortable getting to know me, and ask me unhesitatingly for help. Also, having fun and trying to break barriers between the students by talking and playing with them.”

**Theme 5: Challenge related to recognising all students**

A major challenge reported by all the participants was related to the recognition of individual students, as seen from the following excerpt from Participant 1 “There are five sections of grade one, difficulty in knowing all the names and students.”

Similarly, Participant 2, also reporting the same challenge, “I faced some difficulties in trying to memorise students’ names.”

**Theme 6: Challenges related to the System of Scheduling followed by the School**

Some of the pre-service teachers reported facing challenges related to time schedules, as seen from the following excerpt from Participant 5, “…many classes kept getting cancelled or switched with another teacher.”

**Theme 7: Challenges related to the Non-Cooperative Behaviour of the Mentors**

Some challenges were also faced by the participants owing to the mentor teacher’s inappropriate behaviour. For example, Participant 3 stated that, “My mentor teacher took advantage of me as she made me stay in class with the students when she went out, even left school”

**Theme 8: Action-Plan for Future Improvement: Investment in Relationship Building and Practising Teaching**

The findings indicated a theme around learning which could guide future courses of action for the pre-service teachers. For example, Participant 8 stated that, “First, create a strong relationship with the administration, mentor teacher and students. Lastly, try to teach as much as possible because this is the only way to test and improve my abilities.”

The pre-service teachers in the face-to-face practicum were therefore made more aware of the need to develop good relationships and to invest their time and energy in learning so that they could become better in the coming year.

**Findings from the Virtual Classes**

**Theme 1: Learning to Take Quick Decisions and Become a Problem Solver**

An interesting finding from this study was that, many times the pre-service teachers were left alone with the class, as the mentor could not join online. While this causes some difficulties for the pre-service teachers, it also gives them an opportunity to step in and take charge of the class. The pre-services were able to adapt and make quick decisions regarding the management of the online class.

“In some classes, my mentor teacher lost the connection, which made me intervene quickly and discuss with the students until the teacher returned”

**Theme 2: Learning Strategies for Effective Online Teaching Methods**

Another learning reported by participants, was again generated from the limitations of the online medium of teaching which made traditional teaching methods difficult to implement. In order to succeed, the pre-service teachers learnt to adopt strategies that could be used for online participation and engagement of all students. This is reflected in
the following excerpts,

Participant 18: “I will try my best to add differentiation strategy activities to make sure that all the students have understood the lesson,”

Participant 1: “I researched more about virtual teaching, including useful methods and tools used for mathematics, and how to differentiate and use hands-on experiences online.”

**Theme 3: Challenges related to Technical glitches**

Most of the pre-service teachers mentioned network issues, application problems, time-lags as the challenges that they faced in their online practice. This is further highlighted by Participant 13, “My mentor-teacher, students, and I were having trouble with the internet, which affected the lessons’ quality and objectives.”

**Theme 4: Challenges Related to Pedagogical Conflicts**

A theme that also emerged was around the challenges in implementing lesson plans, or enabling students to learn-by-doing. According to Participant 14, “Virtual classrooms create difficulty in implementing learning centres and learning-by-doing experiences that are very beneficial for young students. It also makes it difficult to differentiate learning and provide authentic learning experiences”

**Theme 5: Challenges related to Non-Personal Interactions**

The participants reported inability to know each student well and build a relationship with them. Additionally, it was seen that the participants struggled with student engagement, as many students would not switch on their cameras, as Participant 14 mentioned, “It is pretty challenging to know each student well, as some students do not participate in lessons at all, they do not open their microphones or cameras.”

Also, some of the participants mentioned that they could not really make a connection with their mentors or talk to them freely. The following excerpt from Participant 17 illustrates this, “However, it was difficult to talk to her about the lessons, activities, and plans with her online. I think these things should be face-to-face.”

**Theme 6: Challenges related to Non-Cooperation of Mentors**

The participants also mentioned difficulties in communicating with their mentor teachers, as the mentors would not reply to their questions on time, or give them time to discuss any issues. For example, according to Participant 19, “The mentor teacher does not answer my questions quickly and she took a lot of time to respond to me.”

**Theme 7: Action-Plan for Future Improvement: Learning to trouble-shoot technical issues**

The challenges related to technology were reported by several participant pre-service teachers in the online practicum, and this was countered by their resolve to learn to troubleshoot and stay ahead of any technological issues that they may face in future. This is reflected in the words of Participant 15, “I will try my best to manage these difficulties by learning about and fixing each technical problem on time and not postponing anything till the last minute.”

**Theme 8: Action-Plan for Future Improvement: Learning to use pedagogical approaches most suited for online lessons**

As many participants in the online practicum faced difficulties in implementing LBD (Learning-by-Doing) or differentiation strategies, they realized the need for learning the new pedagogical approaches that may be better suited for the delivery of online teaching.
This is reflected in the following quote from Participant 18, “Thus, in my teaching, I will try my best to add differentiation strategy activities to make sure that all the students have understood the lesson.”

The findings of the present study are summarised in Table 1, which gives an overview of the similarities and differences between online and face-to-face practicum. In addition, it provides a brief outline of future action plans for improvement.

Table 1

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Findings and Action-Plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Face-to-Face</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learnings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Acquisition of Class Management Skills and Student Engagement Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: Acquisition of Skills for developing Lesson-Plans and Successfully Implementing Them</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Acquisition of insights into individual students’ behaviours and their weaknesses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 4: Learning to bond with the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenges</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 5: Challenge related to recognising all students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 6: Challenges related to the System of Scheduling followed by the School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 7: Challenges related to the Non-Cooperative Behaviour of the Mentors</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Action-Plan for Future</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 8: Investment in Relationship Building and Practising Teaching</td>
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**Discussion**

The current study was aimed to explore the differences between face-to-face and online practicum, with regards to the learnings acquired and challenges faced by the pre-service teachers in the UAE context. After analysing the feedbacks from the pre-service teachers, we found many similarities and differences in terms of the learnings acquired and challenges faced. When learnings or skill acquisitions were compared, there was one prominent similarity, but several differences in the two modes of pre-service teachers’ field experience. For example, in both, the pre-service teachers were exposed to class management skills and techniques. However, in face-to-face mode of teaching the pre-service teachers performed better in class-management and students-engagement, by observing and learning how their mentors. Even though in the virtual mode, the pre-service teachers were inspired to take charge of classroom management and tried their best to keep the students engaged.
when the mentors' network failed, some of the pre-service teachers were not able to do so. These results are similar to that of the one reported by Shishakly and Sabah (2021), wherein the teachers’ challenges in online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected students' performance [32]. The factors that negatively influence the online teaching includes limitations in continuous learning assessment, technical issues in internet connection, and lack of proper communication between the teachers and the students. Other research works conducted on the subject also showed results similar to the one discussed above. For instance, Jin (2022) reported that during the online teaching, the preservice teachers struggled to engage the children and failed to apply appropriate themes to enhance children's learning [7]. A recent study from Turkey also suggested that the pre-service teachers have the view point that ‘online education is not as efficient as face-to-face education [9]. A study by White and McSharry [10] reported that the pandemic related closure of schools and online education acted as a sort of anti-structure, which in turn hindered the process of identity formation among the pre-service teachers. From the aforementioned studies it is clear that lack of familiarity with the online platform is the common theme. Therefore, one possible solution for overcoming the pre-service teachers’ challenges in online teaching is providing them adequate training in technology integration and early field experiences [33; 34].

Notably, the pre-service teachers undertaking online mode of practicum had many negative perceptions, which includes: the lack of adequate interaction with students and mentors, difficulty in classroom management, issues with internet connectivity, etc. The pre-service teachers have more positive perceptions, except for their concern regarding the non-cooperation from the mentors/instructors. A study conducted in UAE by Mohebi and Meda (2021) showed that the pre-service teachers undertaking face-to-face mode of practicum have more positive attitude towards technology integration than the pre-service teachers undertaking virtual practicum [33]. In contrast to these reports, a study conducted on the Malaysian pre-service teachers, who were also performing online teaching practicum, revealed that they have mostly positive perceptions. They were highly confident about their future and were happy about the improved interactions made through online mode, their engagement in active learning, and their adaptation to online syllabus. The only negative point they found is lack of adequate internet connectivity. Studies from other parts of the world also showed that the pre-service teachers were able to adjust and effectively deliver the lessons through online mode [36]. Most importantly, they appreciated the tutor-learner relationship and stated interactions as cordial, collaborative and highly informative and performance wise, they were comparable to the previous semester students who undertook face-to-face practicum [37; 38]. Therefore, it is possible that several of the issues mentioned in the UAE context are only associated with the UAE system. Maybe UAE pre-service teachers’ education system does not have the optimum curriculum for online teaching practicum. Further, the non-cooperation from the mentors/instructors is a serious issue, which should be addressed by the UAE authorities because the mentors are responsible for providing instructions to the pre-service teachers regarding the methods, tools and lesson plans for online teaching.

One prominent difference was that in the face-to-face practicum, the pre-service teachers were able to observe and learn from their mentors, be it the preparation of the lesson plans, getting insights into the behaviours and underlying strengths and weaknesses
of the students, enabling the students to perform, or developing a relationship with students. Those in the online practicum were not able to take advantage of the above benefits, and these findings conform with Nasri et al., (2020) and Kosar (2021) [18; 19]. Offline classes provide a real school setting, and chances to know each other and organize and adore classroom events, interact with students and learn about them [39], and this was also seen in the current study. In the virtual mode, while the pre-service teachers were often forced to step in and take charge of the classroom (and this helped them to learn quick-decision making and become on the spot problem-solver), it did not enable the pre-service teachers to get to know their students or learn adequately from their mentors. This limitation of the online mode of learning and teaching has already been extensively documented in literature [18; 19], and the current research extends the knowledge in the context of pre-service teachers attending their practicum. Also, owing to the unique medium of online teaching, the pre-service teachers were encouraged to learn more about the specific methodologies, teaching strategies and tools that they could use for their online classes.

Another important challenge identified by some of the participating pre-service teachers is the lack of involvement of the pre-service teachers in decision making. For instance, their voice is not considered while planning lessons and scheduling the class timings. Some of them complained regarding cancelling classes scheduled for them or switching the class to some other teacher without prior intimation. Unlike the in-service teachers, the pre-service teachers have to take extra effort to prepare for the class due to the lack of experience. Therefore, such unfriendly behaviour can be disheartening for the pre-service teachers, after they took all the effort to prepare for teaching and applying their theoretical knowledge in class. The lack of stakeholder’s involvement in decision making is previously reported in UAE education sector. For instance, a study by O'Sullivan (2018) showed that the policy makers of UAE had implemented its bilingual education reform program in a top-down way, leaving many stakeholders involving the teachers, feeling marginalized [40]. For successful implementation of any education plan, active involvement of stakeholders like teachers, school authorities, community members and parents are essential [41; 42]. Therefore, avoidance of any stakeholders while taking the decision can only help to reduce the quality of education.

A common challenge that the pre-service teachers from both the virtual and the face-to-face group mentioned was related to their mentors' attitudes; it was found that online mentors were non-responsive to queries posed by the pre-service teachers, while the offline mentors often left the pre-service teachers alone without adequate guidance, though mentors’ role has been found to be instrumental in teachers’ future [27]. This is one aspect of pre-service practicum that has not been researched much earlier, and owing to the fact that practicum’s success is substantially dependent upon the mentors and their ability to transfer their knowledge and skills to the pre-service teachers, this is a serious omission in literature. Some of the other unique challenges faced by the online practicum pre-service teachers also included difficulty in managing the flow and quality of teaching due to technological glitches, difficulties in implementing learning-by-doing methodologies, and difficulties in establishing personal bonds due to the impersonal nature of the online classroom [24; 25]. Similar challenges have also been reported in previous studies with online teaching modules [26]. Dumford and Miller (2018) reported that those students undergoing online courses were more likely develop quantitative reasoning, but may fail to develop collaborative learning,
student-faculty interactions, and group discussions. Meanwhile, their classroom counterparts were found to develop skills like collaborative learning and have improved student-faculty interactions [27]. In a recent study, Hojeij et al., (2021) found that the pre-service teachers perceive the practicum experience as a means to develop professionally. Furthermore, the majority of the pre-service teachers believe that they can create an environment of respect in the classroom, establish a culture of learning and students’ self-learning [43]. The present study also found similar responses from the participants, but the current study extends the findings in the context of the pre-service teachers’ practicum.

**Research Implications**

The research highlighted the differences in the learning of the pre-service teachers in their virtual-field practicum and face-to-face practicum in the context of the UAE, and hence adds to the literature on the subject. While face-to-face practicum provides scope of learning the classroom-management, and coming up with lesson plans and teaching methods that could harness the strengths of individual students and encourage learning, the study raises concerns related to the lack of adequate mentorship. Other challenges were either administration related (due to scheduling mis-match or cancellation of classes without notice) or related to the large size of the classes that made it difficult for them to personally interact and understand all the students. These findings encourage policymakers and school managers to be cognizant and develop appropriate support systems and infrastructure. Also, it was also found that the challenges faced by the pre-service teachers in the virtual field practicum were related to technology and the impersonal nature of the medium that limited their implementation of the traditional teaching methodologies like learning-by-doing. This again calls for an in-depth research to explore more practical and appropriate strategies for online teaching. However, a major finding of this research is that in both online and offline modes, the role of mentors was reported as creating barriers and challenges due to their non-cooperativeness or lack of readiness to provide support and guidance.

**Appendix A: Essay Questions**

- My Learnings during this week
- My Challenges during this week
- How I can improve my future performance

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