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The Effect of Pandemic Period on Student Teachers' Professional Growth During Their Student Teaching Practice

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Abstract

The sudden global pandemic period modified and transformed teaching and learning patterns in higher education. Challenges were also seen in the process of student teaching practice as a crucial component for preparing new teachers. Even though the attendance of student teachers in the school-based class was short, they tried to comprehend the basic parts of the teaching profession. The aim of the study was to reveal student teachers' perception of how they see mentor teachers' willingness to provide their experience in order to prepare them professionally and to what extent the student teaching practice helped student teachers on their professional growth during the pandemic period. The mixed method was used in this study. Data were collected through a survey with student teachers (n=167) from bachelor and master study programs, who were part of the school-based classes in primary schools during the pandemic period. A Chi-Square Test and Pearson Correlation were used to measure the correlation between mentor teachers' willingness and readiness to cooperate and their level of pressure to collaborate during the pandemic period in order to share their experience with student teachers in their school-based class. A semi-structured interview was also realized with a group of primary teachers (n=10) who were assigned as mentors, in order to comprehend their perception about how student teachers can be prepared for the student teaching practice and how the pandemic period impacted in developing them professionally. The findings show that although mentor teachers were willing to collaborate responsibly and efficiently, student teachers found it impossible to improve their professional necessity for self-development due to the short teaching schedule. The research contributes to the knowledge by raising the awareness about the impact of the pandemic period as a serious impediment to student teachers in accomplishing the requirements to become teachers.

Keywords: Mentoring, pandemic period, student teaching practice, student teacher

Introduction

The virus (COVID-19), which broke out in January 2019 in Wuhan-China (Khan, S., et.al., 2020), caused most of the continents (Remuzzi, & Remuzzi, 2020) to face a real collapse. Since the spread was rapid and unstoppable, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic situation all over the world (Ducharme, 2020) and every vital activity was halted as of March. WHO warned

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people around the world daily of the potential risk of infection with Covid-19. The virus had a remarkable impact on health, economy, education and many other areas of life around the world, including the state of Kosovo. The life routine halted because Kosovo started the lockdown as a result of the confirmation of the first case of virus infection in Kosovo, on 3 March (NIPH, 2020), and it lasted two months.

Since the pandemic period had profoundly altered in many aspects of life, including education, then the education of younger generations took another form. From primary to higher education institutions, all were closed from March till September 2020. Even though the Ministry of Education and Science (for the basic education) and the University of Prishtina (for students in higher education) were mobilized, student teachers faced many difficulties, because they had to attend online courses, which was a new approach to learning. The teaching syllabus, the teacher's approach, the student-teacher relationship / collaboration and the assessment changed. During the pandemic period, there were several groups of student teachers who had to attend a school-based class for the student teaching practice. But while primary schools were closed, faculty organized virtual courses that contained information and activities that were necessary for student teachers to comprehend what teaching profession requires. Therefore, with the opening of educational institutions, students were assigned to primary schools in Kosovo region (urban and rural schools). Knowing the role of the mentor as a teacher prepared with knowledge, experience and professional behavior (Hudson, 2010, 2013), then student teachers were assigned to carry out their student teaching practice in a school-based class in order to prepare professionally.

Literature review

New approaches were also brought in education during the pandemic. Online teaching requires more different skills and competencies than traditional teaching (Pulham& Graham, 2018); it is not yet fully integrated in the pre-service teacher coursework. Teachers have difficulties in determining whether students and their students are taking learning seriously (Suryaman at al. 2020).

In many cases, teachers reported that expectations for live, online presence were unclear and that they were unable to hold students accountable for task completion (Marshall et al., 2020; Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020; Peterson et al., 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020). Teachers were also learners, with increased searches for distance learning materials and information on video conferencing and

learning platforms (Cavanaugh & DeWeese, 2020; Pryor et al., 2020). Although advances in educational technology in the last few decades proved immensely useful during this pandemic (Dhawan, 2020), teachers, students, parents, and other relevant educators faced many challenges that they were not ready to overcome (Chakraborty et al., 2020). According to a literature review on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on worldwide educational activities, it has been concluded that online teaching and learning has various limitations, such as "the weakness of online teaching infrastructure, the limited exposure of teachers to online teaching, the information gap, non-conducive environment for learning at home, equity and academic excellence in terms of higher education" (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). To address these barriers to effective technology integration, researchers have recommended restructuring preservice credentialing programs, updating existing school and district technology plans, providing targeted professional development for administrators and teachers, and prioritizing time for teachers to experiment and practice with technology (Ertmer et al., 2012; U.S. DOE OET, 2016; Wachira &Keengwe, 2011). Bergdahl and Nouri examine the experiences of Swedish teachers making the transition to online teaching, and one of the topics highlighted by teachers is the lack of school strategy to transition from face-to-face to online teaching or that the strategies were out of date (Spunei at al, 2022). In the wake of the pandemic, some have called for additional flexibility during the school day to provide teachers with additional opportunities to plan and collaborate with their colleagues (Jones at al. 2022). Most institutions had the necessary technology, but not all of them were prepared to use it (Limani et.al 2019, Miftari et.al, 2021, p. 135). MEST planned teaching in Kosovo through various online platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, Google Meet (Baftiu& Nuci, 2021; Bajcinovci&Dugolli, 2020). Although the results were satisfactory, online learning had its challenges. According to teachers, the main challenges were: lack of motivation, lack of student-student and teacher-student collaboration, and obstacles in real assessment (Ramadani, 2020; Zylfiu& Rasimi, 2020). But educational institutions continued teaching in person in school premises in September, by dividing students into groups (about 20 students per group).

Faculty-based professors from the Faculty of Education also faced challenges during the pandemic. Knowing that the Initial Teacher Education program contains several theoretical courses and 20 weeks of student teaching practice, they had to prepare quickly in order to finish the semester they had started. They started with different platforms in order not to lose the contact with student teachers. They had obstacles in delivering the teaching methodology as planned, and this made

student teachers experience learning differently this year, through online lectures. Knowing that student teaching practice helps student teachers in gaining professional experience and preparing them adequately as future teachers (Capel et al. 2006; Marais & Meier, 2004; Ramsey, 2000), after the opening of schools in September 2020, the attendance of student teachers in a school-based class was seen as an important part, because it is necessary to link the faculty-based course theory with the school-based classroom experience (Gan, 2013). They started their attendance once a week, in order to experience the teaching profession and to link the theoretical knowledge from the faculty with the practical experience in a school-based class. Knowing that mentoring is an integral part of knowledge transfer and interactivity (Faibanks et.al, 2000, Walkington, 2005), a collaboration process (Kwan & Lopez, 2005), and of particular importance for the professional growth of student teachers (Ambrosetti, 2010; He, 2009; Hobson, 2001), then the attendance of student teachers in a school-based class was accompanied by the teacher who was certified as a mentor. This way, the experience gained in classes will serve them to create the idea and to experience what the teacher's profession is like.

Problem and the focus of the research

The pandemic period affected people's health, livelihood, socialization, their education and the world economy. The way of teaching and learning changed all over the world (Castonguay, 2020). Online evaluation was extremely challenging. World Bank reports (2021) show, among other things, that we learned from the pandemic period that access to technology is necessary, but not entirely functional; that teachers are much more critical; that education is an ongoing effort; and that parents are teacher's main collaborators (World Bank, 2021). Beginning with this issue, the realization of this research focused on student teachers' experience during their teaching in a school-based class. This activity has to be carried out in front of the mentor teacher and the children in primary schools. The mentor teacher's level of involvement during this period had also proved crucial. Their perspective has so undoubtedly been taken into account.

Given that mentoring is a process that passes from the experienced to the less experienced person (Bozeman and Feeney 2007), then the component of the student teaching practice and its mentoring was important (Anderson & Stillman, 2013; Clarke et al., 2014; Valencia et al., 2009; Wilson, 2013; Zeichner, 2010). So, the purpose of this research was to look at the progress of the

student teaching practice during the pandemic and its impact on the professional preparation of students. Questions through which data are analyzed:

- how student teachers see mentor teachers' willingness to provide their experience in order to prepare them professionally,
- to what extent mentor teachers helped student teachers on their professional growth during the pandemic period.

Knowing that hypotheses are essential for offering a concise and verifiable foundation for research, the data were then analyzed based on these three hypotheses:

H1: Mentor teachers' performance in the classroom is linked to their willingness to collaborate with student teachers during the student teaching practice in the pandemic period;

H2: The student teaching practice had a positive impact on the professional growth of student teachers;

H3: The pandemic period hampered the possibility of student teachers' professional preparation during the student teaching practice.

Method

Research Design

In order to analyze the relationship between mentor teachers' willingness and readiness to collaborate and the amount of pressure they experienced to cooperate throughout the pandemic period, a mixed-method approach was used in this study, as the third approach (Creswell, 2014). A survey was given to n=167 student teachers participating in master's and bachelor's degree programs as part of the data gathering process. Researchers used a Chi-Square Test and Pearson Correlation analysis to determine the relationship between mentor teacher collaboration and pressure to interact with student teachers in their school-based classes. These statistical approaches were selected to evaluate the relationships between the variables of interest.

A semi-structured interview with a group of n=10 mentor teachers was also undertaken to acquire further insights into the perspectives of primary teachers who acted as mentors throughout the pandemic period. The purpose of this interview was to learn how student teachers may be better prepared for their teaching careers and how the pandemic period affected their professional growth.

Participants

Since the student teaching practice was conducted at the same time for the bachelor's and master's level, both levels were included in the research. In bachelor's level, participants were student teachers from the third year (n=128) and from the master's level, they were student teachers of the second year of master's level of education (n=39) (Table1.). They were selected randomly to attend school-based classes in different primary schools in Kosovo region during the pandemic (October-December) (Table 2.) and receive experience from teachers appointed as mentors. Knowing that the teacher education program prepares teachers for urban and rural schools (Ramsey, 2000, p. 53), student teachers were assigned to different schools and places inside and outside Prishtina. In this research were included: student teachers (n = 167) and mentor teachers (n =50):

- bachelor level students, profiles: primary, preschool and general pedagogy
- master level students, subject profiles
- teachers appointed as mentors in primary schools in Kosovo

Table 1

Participants' description

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	155	92.8	92.8	92.8
	Male	12	7.2	7.2	100.0
	Bachelor	128	76.6	76.6	76.6
	Master	39	23.4	23.4	100.0

Table 2

The school where the student teaching practice was held

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	In Prishtina	42	25.1	25.1	25.1
	outside Prishtina	125	74.9	74.9	100.0
	Total	167	100.0	100.0	

Mentor teachers (n=10) involved in the interview were selected randomly in some schools in Prishtina and in some schools outside Prishtina.

Data Collection

During the pandemic, student teachers were assigned to educational institutions for a period of six weeks (once a week) to benefit from mentor teachers' experience. In this way, mentor teachers would help link the theoretical part gained from the faculty-based course "Pedagogical Practice" with the experience gained in a school-based class. The survey for student teachers focused on their perception concerning the student teaching practice. It contained four sections with questions, statements and space for free opinions. In the first section, there were six questions that required general information form participants (sex, level of study, the place where they realized their student teaching practice and their perception about their mentor teacher); the second section contained four statements related to student teachers' perceptions about their experience in a faculty-based course; the third section contained twelve statements and one space for opinions concerning their experience in school-based classes (their attendance and relationship with mentor teachers); and the last section contained three statements and one space for opinions concerning their experience after the pandemic period. In general, this survey was conducted to gather information about how ready the mentor teachers were to cooperate; to what degree the theoretical part is being addressed and linked with the practical part in a school-based class; what they gained professionally and how they think student teaching can be after the pandemic. Data collection was conducted from student teachers (n=167) after they completed the student teaching practice in a school-based class. The survey was sent in December 2020 by email in Google form to each student teacher through their university official address (i.e., xx@studet.uni-pr.edu). The statistical analyzes were conducted with SPSS, version 24.

The interview with mentor teachers (n=10) was realized online in January 2021 through Google platform. Questions for mentor teachers focused on their observation and analysis for the professional preparation of student teachers as their mentee; in the duties and responsibilities that a student teacher has as a future teacher; and to what extent is the commitment of student teachers during the student teaching practice in a school-based class.

Data Analysis

The research study analyzed student teaching practice during the pandemic period and identified three main themes: the student teachers' professional development, the mentor teachers' readiness to collaborate, and the pandemic era's influence on the teaching and learning process. These themes provide important light on how the pandemic impacted the teaching process and the relationship between the mentor and student teachers.

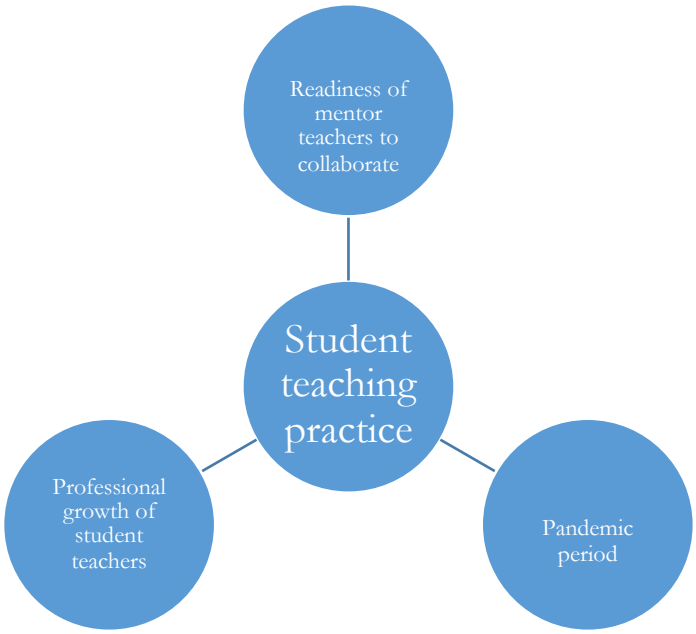

Figure 1: Three themes in which the results for the student teaching practice during the pandemic period was based.

Findings

Student teachers provided answers for the quantitative section. They provided feedback on the survey's questions, which led to these findings:

Table 3:

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	847,657[a]	280	,000
Likelihood Ratio	285,783	280	,393
Linear-by-Linear Association	32,853	1	,000
N of Valid Cases	170		

307 cells (97,5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,01.

In Pearson Chi-Square analysis, we considered that there is a statistically significant connection between the performance of mentor teachers in a school-based class and their willingness to collaborate with student teachers during student teaching practice in the pandemic period. X2 (280) 847,657, p = .000.

According to the student teachers' perception, the theoretical part offered by the faculty-based course "Pedagogical Practice II and III" in bachelor's level; and "Pedagogical Practice 2" at master's level, had a satisfactory connection with classroom findings during the student teaching practice. The faculty-based professor, who taught this course, kept constant contacts with student teachers, certainly during the online lectures, and, this way, student teachers had no problem communicating with him. While there was a last question, as a comment, in which student teachers could express their opinion, some suggestions that should be discussed / reviewed by the management and staff of the Faculty of Education were raised:

- the duration of days of attendance in the class
- short teaching hours in the class
- certain tasks for student teachers to be reduced (quote: I think that the tasks from the Pedagogical Practice course should be reduced because we did not have the possibility to properly experience the student teaching practice by focusing on the tasks that we had because the teaching hours were very short).
- the contact of the faculty professor with the mentor teacher (quote: I think it would be better for the mentor teacher to be in constant contact with the faculty.)
- lack of teachers in schools, for students of General Pedagogy profile

- time planned for the student teaching practice should be separate from lectures at the faculty

Considering the results above, the days of student teacher attendance in a school-based class should be increased (from 1 to 3) because it is impossible for the student teacher to gain experience and knowledge in 1 day with a short teaching schedule; The practice should also be separated from lectures so that the realization is as effective as possible; The student teacher finds it impossible to observe, reflect and carry out student teaching practice accurately if he is too busy with tasks from the faculty-based professor; the faculty-based supervisor or faculty-based course professor should make efforts to be in contact with a teacher mentor in order to discuss any ambiguities that may arise during the student teacher attendance in a school-based class, or simply to get an opinion about him; The lack of pedagogues in schools is a concern for the students of the General Pedagogy profile and, because of this, the practice is being realized in primary school classes.

Table 4.

Correlations

		Student teaching practice	Professional growth
Student teaching practice	Pearson Correlation	1	,039
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,615
	N	167	167
Professional growth	Pearson Correlation	,039	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,615	
	N	167	167

The linear relationship between the student teaching practice and the professional growth of student teachers during the pandemic period was assessed in the Pearson Correlation analysis. We can consider that we have a non-significant positive linear relationship in the Pearson Correlation test, r = .039, p = 0.615, N = 167.

Student teachers think that, despite the fact that student teaching practice took place during the pandemic, their professional preparation was inevitable because the readiness of the mentor teacher for their professional contribution was sufficient for student teachers to gain knowledge and experience while attending a school-based class.

Table 4.1: *Paired Samples Statistics*

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Professional growth	2,5778	167	,51184	,03961
	Student teaching practice	3,1836	167	,91810	,07105

Table 4.2: *Paired Samples Test*

		Paired Differences					t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Professional growth –Student teaching practice	-,60579	,95329	,07377	-,75143	-,46014	-8,212	166	,000

The impact of the pandemic on the professional growth of students during the student teaching practice was assessed in the analysis of Paired Samples Statistics. The average of students' professional preparation did not have a better result (M = 2.57, SD = 0.51) than the student teaching practice (M = 3.18, SD = 0.91). The important interpretation in this result is the difference between the average ones, 0.61, 95% CI {0.46, 0.75}. The result is statistically important, t(166) = 8.22, p = .000.

The interview-based qualitative component includes mentor teachers who provided these findings: The mentor teacher assigned to the student teacher has been willing to prepare the student professionally and offer him the realization of the requirements they had during the student teaching practice. They were initially asked about how important the student teaching practice is. According to their responses, this experience is considered important for the professional growth of the student teacher.

MT1, said: "I think that the work environment, and the direct communication with children, gives them the feeling about the teaching profession. It also instills in them the love for the job and the profession that they have chosen".

Mentor teachers see the professional preparation of student teachers during student teaching practice when they:

- are regular on set days for practice
- cooperate with the mentor teacher
- are attentive to the progress of the lesson
- take notes according to the instructions at the faculty
- are able to realize the lessons

So, the mentor teacher thinks that the student teacher will be prepared professionally if he regularly attends the school-based class he is assigned to; During his stay in the school-based class, he should establish a good working relationship with the mentor teacher; Attention plays an important role for the professional growth. Therefore, the student teacher should pay attention to the work of the mentor teacher in order to benefit from the professional experience that the teacher exchanges for him. No matter how much the student teacher observes and reflects, if they are not written down in the student teacher's Reflection Diary, according to the instructions in the Practice Manual, then they can be forgotten. Therefore, the professor of the course should require the writing down in the Reflection Diary and his evaluation should be an integral part of the final evaluation; As a student teacher of the 3rd and 4th year of study, it is thought that the student is ready to prepare and realize the lesson, because it is already known that students of these years have taken the theoretical part in the faculty and they should be ready to put it into practice.

The mentor teacher thinks that, during the student teaching practice, the main tasks and responsibilities of the student teachers are:

- to be regular in the learning process
- to show his interest in classroom activities
- to observe critically and reflectively
- to know his competencies
- to respect the institution
- to understand that he is a "pupil"
- to use a standard language in communication
- to respect the dress code.

During the student teaching practice, mentor teachers think that the student teacher is obliged to be regular and to respect the teaching schedule; His interest will automatically contribute to the professional preparation; An observation of a higher level will impact on student's critical thinking and the responsibility of being a "pupil" during the student teaching practice.
According to the mentor teacher, the commitment of the student teacher during the student teaching practice is shown when: he is regular in the teaching process; he shows measurable closeness to students in the classroom; he collaborates with the mentor teacher; he is attentive; he respects the dress code; he is ready to take the responsibility to plan the lesson; he should be: a demander, a researcher, an analyzer, responsible, active, etc.

MT5 said:" The tasks and responsibilities of student teachers are quite large and sensitive because at the same time the student "forms himself professionally, but the right approach to their development is also his responsibility, that is, to very responsible in the institution and in the school-based class, to approach children and their parents, the mentor teacher and their individuals related to school".

Although it was a pandemic time, the mentor teacher did not feel insecure with the presence of the student teacher in his class. The mentor teacher, with his competencies, tried to contribute in the

best possible way to the preparation of the student teacher. His contribution during the student teaching practice was:

- welcoming to the class
- creating the space within the classroom
- various instructions: profession, approach to students, documents, plans
- the development of skills for planning and realizing the lesson
- instructions for the challenges of the teaching profession
- access to meetings with students on Zoom platform

Additional comments regarding the realization of the student teaching practice have been positive, except the fact that mentor teachers think they would have the opportunity to contribute more if the teaching hours were longer and the student teachers were present in school-based classes for a longer period of time.

MT3: "My contribution as a teacher has been oriented towards the points that are required about the professional preparation of a student, including familiarization with the curriculum, the appropriate approach to students, orientation in the preparation of the activities carried out in class by students, commitment to knowing the stages of stages of lesson and teaching methods and techniques suitable for the students' level, offering cooperation with students in the classroom, enabling him to closely observe the peculiarities of each student from the pedagogical point of view… etc".

Discussion

The research results discussed in this article focus on the student teaching practice, mentor teachers' interactions with student teachers, and the effects of the pandemic on student teachers' professional growth. Let's examine the main ideas and their implications in more detail:

(i) According to the Chi-Square analysis, there is a statistically significant link between the mentor teachers' classroom performance and their readiness to work with student teachers during the pandemic. This shows that the involvement and encouragement of mentor teachers throughout the student teaching practice has a significant impact on the experience as a whole and on the results. In Pryor et al.'s (2020) phenomenological study of elementary educators, 15 out of 18

teachers indicated that they benefitted from this experience and they planned to incorporate elements of distance education into the future teaching. The elements they found most constructive were: independent learning, higher level of thinking, organization, use of technology to individualize learning, and improved communication with stakeholders (Pryor et al., 2020).

(ii) Student Teachers' Perception: Student teachers felt that there was an appropriate match between the theoretical material covered in the faculty-led course "Pedagogical Practice II and III" and what they observed in the classroom during their student teaching practice. This is in line with Friesen & Besley (2013), Singh & Richards (2006), and Nevgi& Löfström (2015). Considering the importance of teacher professional preparation and the student teaching practice in the development of teachers' professional identities, the holistic and related character of effective teacher development programs are emphasized. By emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between the theoretical knowledge and the practical experience, educational institutions and policymakers can forge a strong and long-lasting framework that enables teachers to be transformative change agents, models of pedagogical excellence, and nurturing guides in the intellectual and moral development of future generations. While lectures in this period were delivered online, they valued the ongoing dialogue with the faculty-based professor, which fostered interaction. However, some recommendations for improvement were made, such as increasing the number of attendance days in a school-based class (from 1 to 3), separating practice from lectures for greater efficiency, and reducing some tasks in order to concentrate better on the student teaching practice.

(iii) Correlation Between Student Teaching Practice and Professional Growth: The Pearson Correlation analysis found a non-significant positive linear link between the student teaching practice and the professional progress during the epidemic period. Student teachers believed that their professional preparation was inevitable since mentor teachers were prepared to participate successfully during the student teaching practice, even though the association was not statistically significant. This is also supported by researches made with student teachers by Norman &Feiman-Nemser (2005) and Valenčič &Vogrinc (2007), which show that mentor teachers with extensive pedagogical experience give vital guidance, support, and critical criticism focused on the specific needs and settings of each of the student teachers. These mentors foster a nurturing and collaborative environment that encourages student teachers to refine their teaching methods,

classroom management techniques, and student engagement methodologies through sustained and meaningful interactions.

(iv)Perspectives from mentor teachers: Mentor teachers stressed the value of the student teaching practice for the professional growth of student teachers. They found important elements, including consistent attendance in the school-based class, cooperation with the mentor teacher, careful observation and reflection, and taking notes as directed in the Practice Manual, that contribute to the successful preparation of student teachers. Considering this importance, Hallam et al. (2012) and Trubowitz (2004) also indicated that mentor teachers must represent a combination of modeling, support, professionalism, cooperation, and encouraging experience in order to establish a supportive and transformational learning environment for their student teachers.

(v) Mentor Teachers' Contributions: Despite the difficulties presented by the pandemic, mentor teachers made a significant contribution to the professional preparation of student teachers. They offered guidance on many different topics, such as professional behavior, lesson planning, teaching methods, and students' approaches. By using tools like Zoom, they also made it easier for student teachers to participate in online sessions. This is in line with Lie & Medwell (2021) research, which indicated that this new approach during the pandemic period provided a welcoming and creative environment for student teachers to advance professionally. It provided student teachers with the skills and information they need to flourish in the dynamic and ever-changing area of education by utilizing digital tools.

These findings emphasize the value of mentor teacher participation and encouragement in the student teaching experience. Student teachers believed that the practice was essential to their professional development even though there was no statistically significant links between them. The suggestions made by both the mentor teachers and the student teachers give insightful information for boosting the general quality and efficiency of the student teaching practice. These results can be used as a foundation for more study and enhancements to teacher training programs, particularly in times like pandemic.

The results indicate the importance of student teaching practice in the development of student teachers as well as the importance of mentor teachers' cooperation and support. Institutions should address the difficulties caused by the pandemic and take innovative measures to guarantee

that new teachers are qualified and competent in order to maximize the advantages of student teaching practice.

Conclusion

The student teaching practice, as an integral part of the faculty that prepares teachers, plays an important role during the 4-year studies. Knowing that student teachers get prepared professionally through this experience and link practice with theory, then their attendance in a school-based class is necessary.

The performance of mentor teachers in a school-based class is linked to their willingness to collaborate with student teachers during student teaching practice in the pandemic period.

A mentor must be appointed so that student teachers would gain professional experience and exchange of knowledge. Since the role of the teacher is to provide adequate teaching to his students, he should provide experience, knowledge and professional conduct to the student teacher.

This research was conducted in order to understand the willingness of mentor teachers to collaborate with student teachers, and to understand the role and the importance of the student teaching practice for the professional preparation of student teachers and the impact of the pandemic period in gaining this experience. Therefore, the results show that, despite the pandemic period, the collaboration and willingness of mentor teachers was at the required level. Student teachers have received the necessary information and they have benefited from the student teaching practice offered in the school-based class. Because of the pandemic, only one student could attend the class per week. As a result of this, the short time spent in a school-based class was the only obstacle for achieving a proper attendance and a completion of tasks and responsibilities from the faculty-based course “Pedagogical Practice”.

Conclusions regarding the research on how important the student teaching practice is for the professional growth of student teachers, show that, according to their perception (student teachers), the readiness of mentor teachers has made them see the importance and weight of the student teaching practice in preparing for the teacher’s profession. On the other hand, for the mentor teacher, the student teaching practice has a positive impact on the professional growth of student teachers when they show their interest in the teacher’s profession and reflect on their experience.

They also respect teacher's schedule, use a standardized language and know their competencies while attending a school-based class.

The pandemic period has hampered the possibility of the professional preparation of students during the student teaching practice. It has affected all professions, especially professions linked to the professional practice. After the schools were opened, in order not to lose the effect of the student teaching practice for the professional preparation of the students studying at the Faculty of Education, and not wanting to put the pupils, staff or even the students themselves at risk, they were allowed to attend classes only once a week. As a consequence of this, results show that, despite this extremely short attendance of student teachers in a school-based class, mentor teachers have tried to give the maximum and provide the necessary experience and information to student teachers. Their main obstacle was the short schedule of classes because of the pandemic, and student teachers, pupils in the classroom, and the teachers themselves were damaged because of this schedule since they could not meet and realize an ideal teaching.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, a variety of recommendations for additional research have been made that might help to better understand the student teaching practice and its effects, particularly in light of issues associated to the pandemic:

- The impact of the pandemic on long-term student teaching practices may be explored in a further study. The long-term effects of these restrictions on student teachers' professional development and efficiency as teachers might be examined to gain important information for future planning and policy choices.
- It might be possible to determine the variations in student teachers' levels of readiness and professional growth by conducting comparative studies between those who completed long enough pre-pandemic student teaching practice and those who did shorter practices during the pandemic. This can clarify the importance of having enough exposure and time in school-based classes.
- The research may focus on the preparation of mentor teachers and their openness to working with student teachers. The selection of mentor teachers, training programs, and support systems may all be improved by institutions and faculties by better understanding the elements that go into effective mentoring and assistance.

- Researching the effectiveness of online student teaching practice might be useful given the move to online learning during the pandemic period. Future blended or hybrid teaching strategies may be revealed by examining how online platforms affect student-mentor relationships, observation, reflection, and the overall learning experience.
- It could be interesting to do research into how shortened student teaching practice affects student learning results. Strategies to enhance the learning experience under difficult circumstances can be informed by an understanding of how the limited time with student teachers impacts on student's learning and academic success.
- It is possible to do research to find solutions for the problems brought on by interruptions caused by the pandemic period and provide the best possible student teaching practice. In times of insecurity, maintaining the level of teacher preparation may benefit from investigating innovative methods like simulation-based training or immersive virtual classrooms.
- Finding strategies to close the gap between the theoretical knowledge and the practical use can possibly be done by looking into the collaboration between mentor teachers and faculty-based members. Better coherence between the school-based class and the field can result from an understanding of how various stakeholders might collaborate to help student teachers throughout their practice.
- Student teacher perceptions on modifications made during the pandemic period might be further explored in the research. Understanding how they reacted to the adjustments made to their learning environment, tasks, and responsibilities, as well as how these modifications affected their overall learning experience, can provide helpful insights for the future design and enhancement of programs.

Addressing these study issues would help educational institutions and policymakers improve the standard of student teaching practices, particularly in difficult times, and make sure that student teachers are properly prepared for their future responsibilities as educators.

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