



LEARNING TO TEACH IN THE ERA OF UNCERTAINTIES: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT BY STUDENT TEACHERS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN UGANDA

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Abstract:

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is not only being felt by different social classes of people, but also across levels of education systems. There was a paradigm shift from the traditional teaching approaches to a more flexible one, including remote teaching. This crisis uncovered the many challenges in the education system such as access and lack of supportive environments for both teachers and learners. The teacher trainees were greatly affected as they could hardly complete their teacher training programme in time. The purpose of this study was to investigate student teachers' perception of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, to explore challenges faced by student teachers; document lessons learnt and coping strategies improvised while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. A concurrent mixed method design was adopted. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 46-year three student teachers of Muni University. Data were collected using student teachers' reflective journals and reflective meetings. Challenges experienced by student teachers were related to placement, supervisor-supervisee relationship, inadequate support from school authorities, inadequate skills in classroom room management and time management. Student teachers adopted coping strategies like teamwork, collaborative and adaptive skills, classroom and discipline management. Four categories of lessons learnt were adaptiveness, collaboration, creativity and uniqueness of learners. They learnt how to incorporate modern approaches including those embedded in Bloom's taxonomy. The study recommended that teacher training institutions should ensure adequate and wholistic preparation of student teachers prior to school practice; school practice supervisors should treat school practice supervision as a non-judgemental exercise meant to enhance student teachers' professional growth, and school authorities should provide required materials and mentorship to student teachers.

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1. Introduction

Education plays a critical role in social transformation, scientific and technological innovation. In pursuit of these goals, teacher training institutions globally aim at achieving basic objectives such as *"improving the general educational background of student teachers; increasing their knowledge and understanding of the subjects they are to teach, understanding the pedagogy of children, and learning and developing practical skills and competencies"* (Marais & Meier, 2008 p.221). Internationally, a theory-practice gap has long resulted in a paradigm shift by all states in resources allocation to teacher training institutions in order to improve the quality of pre-service teacher trainees. In England, there was a shift of resources from universities to schools in order to make Initial Teacher Education (ITE) more practical and workplace-based (Grudnoff, 2011). Similarly, Grudnoff added that several reviews done in New Zealand between 1990 and 2010 attributed the poor quality of novice teachers to the theoretical nature of the ITE curriculum. In Uganda, the quality of teachers which used to be recognised across entire East Africa has continually deteriorated in the past decades due to a number of factors. Most stakeholders attribute this to the failure of teacher training institutions to adequately instil in the graduates required professional competence to match the 21st-century demands (Omara, Akwongo, Asega, Ecuru, & Okwong, 2021). In order to address the above gaps, a number of interventions have been introduced including a strong emphasis on school practice.

School practice which is referred to as practicum or teaching practice in other contexts refers to an apprenticeship stage whereby student teachers are deployed to various schools in order for them to gain professional knowledge and experience, by translating all educational theories into practice (Kangwa, 2018). According to Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2016), school practice refers to a range of experiences student teachers are exposed to when working in schools or classrooms. The experience helps student teachers to acquire professional knowledge and try the art of teaching before getting into the real world of teaching. A study conducted by Kangwa (2018), further highlighted several benefits of school practice including *"helping student teachers to apply the teaching skills they learnt in class into practice; developing problem-solving skills in their teaching; mastering the subject matter; application and use of different teaching-learning methods and materials; improving classroom management skills based on feedback from school-based supervisors; assessment and good record-keeping skills, and finally skills in identification and handling of learners with special needs such as learning difficulties"* (p.6). One can therefore conclude that school practice is vital in teacher preparation but challenged by several factors such as geographical location, low and uneven distribution of teacher experts (Marais & Meier, 2008). Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2016) acknowledged challenges related to lack of resources and a wide range of students' indiscipline. Unprofessional

supervisors and the absence of school practice budgets also hamper the effectiveness of school practice (Apolot, Otaala, Kamanyire, & Komakech, 2018). Recently, coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has come with its own challenges globally.

Since November 2019, the world became shocked by the outbreak of COVID-19, with its origin in the city of Wuhan, China. The virus then spread to all parts of the World within a very short time, leading to among other measures, school closures so as to reduce the spread of the virus (Putra, Liriwati, & Tahrim, 2020). The global impact of Coronavirus pandemic is not only being felt by different social class of people, but also across levels of education systems. This led to a paradigm shift from the traditional teaching approaches to a more flexible ones, including remote teaching. This crisis uncovered the many challenges in the education system including access and lack of supportive environments for both teachers and learners.

The teacher trainees were greatly affected as they could hardly complete their teacher training programme in time. This situation resulted into diverse forms of stress. A study by Gustems-Carnicer, Calderón, Calderón-Garrido, Gustems-Carnicer and Calderón (2019) identified the main sources of practicum related stress to include behaviour management, tutor visits, workload, excessive expectations and lack of support as well as social and financial stress. In a similar vein, Mahmoudi and Özkan, (2016) stated that the main sources of student teachers stress are supervisors and mentors behaviours, school-related issues, classroom management, and affective factors like level of anxiety. During school practice, student teachers' anxiety was due to many factors such as preparation, classroom management and relationship with mentors and supervisors. However, limited research has been conducted to explore how student teachers cope with the different kind of stress. Gustems-Carnicer et al., (2019) acknowledged that "*very little time is devoted to recognizing the signs of stress and introducing students to procedures, techniques and strategies to cope successfully with stressful situations*" (p.376). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore student teachers' experiences while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Teacher training institutions exposes student teachers to both the school and classroom experiences through school practice. In Uganda, school practice is an integral component of a teacher training course as recommended by National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) and Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA). Subjecting student teachers to school practice help to bridge the gap between theory and practice and also gives them chances to get mentoring services from school authorities (Mapolisa & Tshabalala, 2016). However, with the outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent school closures, most student teachers could not access educational institutions where they could conduct school practice. Nevertheless, those who had opportunity to conduct school practice could have done it with a lot of difficulties and yet nothing is known about their experiences. Therefore, this study was meant to document Muni University student teachers' experience of school practice conducted during COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to document Muni University student teachers' experience of school practice conducted during COVID-19 pandemic.

1.3 Study objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- 1) examine challenges student teachers faced during school practice in the era of COVID-19 pandemic
- 2) explore the coping strategies improvised by student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3) document lessons learnt by student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic

1.4 Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- 1) What challenges did the student teachers face while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) What were the coping strategies improvised by student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic?
- 3) What lessons did student teachers learn while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic?

1.5 Scope of the study

The study was conducted among student teachers of Muni University. In November 2020, 46 third year students offering Bachelor of Science with Education were posted to secondary schools located in Arua city, and the districts of Arua district, Maracha, Koboko and Terego for eight weeks of school practice. The study examined student teachers' experiences while conducting school during COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study investigated the challenges faced, coping strategies employed and lessons learnt by study student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda.

2. Methodology

The study on student teachers' experience during COVID-19 pandemic employed a concurrent mixed method design. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed. Qualitative approach involved assessment of participants' subjective views, opinions and behaviours using debriefing meetings, while quantitative approach on the other hand employed use of document analysis. It involved generation of data in numerical form and subjected it to rigorous quantitative analysis in a more formal and rigid form (Kothari, C., 2004). Mixed method design involves collecting, analysing and mixing data in a single study (Woodman, 2014). Application of concurrent mixed method

design saved time since data was collected at once and the strength of one approach compensated for the weakness in another (Creswell, 2009).

The study was conducted among Muni University student teachers. Muni University is the sixth public university located in north western Uganda. The university was established by the Act of parliament under the statutory instrument no. 13 of 2013. Its object being to equitably expand higher education at undergraduate and post graduate levels and to increase the number of scientists in Uganda including science teachers offering Bachelor of Science with Education (Republic of Uganda, 2013). All the forty-six third year student teachers offering Bachelor of Science with Education programme were purposively selected to participate in the study. This was the group of student teachers who conducted their school practice during COVID-19 pandemic and so it was imperative to examine their school practice experience.

Data collection methods used were document analysis. Data from reflective journals and debriefing meeting with student teachers were collected and coded for subsequent analysis. Reflection consisted of systematic evaluation of complex factors resulting in judgment of a course of action (Mena-Marcos & Tillema, 2013). During school practice, student teachers were encouraged to keep record of their experiences including challenges and lessons learnt while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. At the end of the school practice student teachers compiled and submitted a reflective report to the school practice coordination office of Muni University. Reflective reports were divided into sections such as introduction, support received from supervisors and school authorities, challenges faced, coping strategies and lessons learnt. The student teachers' reports coded from no. 1 to no. 46 were later analysed and key ideas identified. Debriefing/reflective meeting was conducted after school practice to collect qualitative data. The reflection meeting attended by both supervisors and student teachers was meant to elicit student teachers' experience on the challenges they encountered during COVID-19 pandemic, coping strategies and lessons learnt while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the student teachers' narratives were captured verbatim and coded.

The following techniques were used to analyse data. Firstly, key challenges were extracted from student teachers' reflective reports (quantitative data) and represented using descriptive statistics employing majorly frequencies and percentages. Data were analyzed with the aid of SPSS version 27 and presented on frequency tables and graphs. Secondly, thematic analysis was used to generate codes and themes from reflective reports and minutes of the debriefing meeting. Key phrases concerning challenges, coping strategies and lessons learnt from the reports and debriefing meeting were extracted to strengthen the quantitative data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Demographic data of the research participants

Data were collected from all the third-year education students of Muni university offering Bachelor of Science with Education programme who conducted their final school practice during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic. After the first COVID-19 lock down, the finalists were called to report back to their respective institutions. Immediately, faculty of education posted 46 student teachers for eight weeks of their final school practice. All the 46 student teachers compiled a reflective report and attended the reflective meeting in January 2021. Demographic data on the research participants are shown in the following table.

Table 1: Demographic data of the research participants

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Female	7	15.2
	Male	39	84.8
	Total	46	100.0

Results in Table 1 above showed that the majority of respondents were male (84.8%) while 07 were female student teachers, representing 15.2%. This shows gender disparity between male and female students in most Ugandan educational institutions. A similar study conducted by Apolot et al., (2018) found gender disparity between male and female student teachers. This may be due to insufficient emphasis on women empowerment and inadequate career guidance to female students in Uganda secondary schools.

3.2. Findings from quantitative data analysis

The results of quantitative data analysis presented in Figure 1 below revealed that student teachers experienced a myriad of challenges during the school practice conducted in the era of COVID-19. The major challenges included placement, inadequate instructional materials, supervisor-supervisee relationship, classroom management and time.



Figure 1: Challenges student teachers faced during school practice in the era of COVID-19 pandemic

Out of 46 respondents, a total of 29 representing 20% of respondents cited school practice placement as one of the major challenges they experienced while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic while 30 respondents representing 21% reported inadequate instructional materials as one of the challenges. In addition, supervisor-supervisee relation and time constraint were also identified among the challenges each accounting for 29 responses, representing 20%. However, classroom management recorded the lowest responses (28, representing 19%). Since minimal differences exist among the findings, it can be concluded that student teachers experienced almost same magnitude of all these challenges while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2: Findings from qualitative data analysis

Research questions	Generated themes
Question 1: What challenges did the student teachers face during school practice?	Theme 1: Placement Theme 2: Inadequate instructional materials Theme 3: Supervisor-Supervisee relationship Theme 4: Classroom management Theme 5: Time constraint

From Table 2 above, thematic analysis of reflective reports and reflective meetings gave rise to a number of challenges student teachers experienced while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. These were grouped into themes as shown above. The views of the participants corresponded with quantitative findings that student teachers experienced challenges related to placement, inadequate instructional materials, supervisor-supervisee relationship, classroom management and time.

3.3 Placement of student teachers as a challenge faced during COVID-19 pandemic

Prior to school practice, students were posted to validated secondary schools by the school practice coordination office of Muni university. According to Muni university school practice manual, the department is supposed to display a list of schools with vacancies from which student teachers make up to three choices, and subsequently a student teacher is posted to one of the schools among his/her choice. However, in the last school practice conducted during COVID-19 pandemic, most student teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the schools they were posted. The choices were limited due to the fact that only schools with candidate classes were operational. In figure 3.1 above, 20% of the student teachers were not satisfied with school practice placement claiming that their performance was affected because they were not posted to schools of their choices. One of the statements in their reflective reports confirmed the claim "... I was not taken to a school of my choice. This affected my performance because I was demotivated and out of place. I took long to admit this posting..." (Student no. 12). Additionally, another statement read: "... I just went to that school because I wanted to complete my course. It was not the school I wanted. They just forced me to accept that school. I would have performed much better if they respected my choice..." (Reflective meeting, January 2021). "... some schools offered accommodation and meals but our school did not. We had to rent on our own..." (Student no. 25).

Another student teacher claimed they were rejected by the school authority of a private school on reporting because the proprietor of the school did not want student teachers to teach candidate classes (Student no. 18). This challenge could have arisen due to communication gap between the university and some secondary schools. The study corroborates the findings by Mokoena (2017) who found that student teachers from an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in South Africa expressed dissatisfaction with school practice placement. Most participants hardly got schools where they could get adequate support from school authorities. Some schools had poor management and inadequate mentors. All these challenges impacted negatively on some student teachers' performance as they were demotivated and disillusioned.

3.4 Inadequate instructional materials as a challenge faced by student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic

The importance of instructional resources for teaching and learning cannot be underrated. Previous studies revealed that instructional materials make learning more interesting, realistic, practical and appealing (Ajoke, 2017). From the current study, quantitative data analysis of student teachers' reflective reports presented in figure 3.1 above indicated that 21% of the students reported inadequate instructional materials as one of the challenges that affected their delivery while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, one of the key themes that appeared during the reflective meeting with student teachers after their school practice was inadequate instructional resources provided to them by both the university and the schools they were attached to. The following extracts attest to this claim: *"I must say that teaching during this era of COVID was not simple because of lack of enough materials to support teaching and learning. We were not given enough materials by the university and yet our schools could not provide all the materials. Things were very hard. But am happy that I finished"* (Reflective meeting, January 2021). In the reflective report, one student wrote: *"One challenge I faced as a private student was inadequate resources for teaching. The few materials I was given got done in the third week of school practice. I had nothing to do. I contacted the head of department but in vain. The school also did not have enough money to buy those materials to teach practical. It was just struggling up to the end* (Student no. 31). The inadequacy and non-utilization of instructional materials resulted in the frequent use of lecture method, hence limiting teachers' professional growth. Consequently, learners' performance was affected negatively due to few hands-and-minds-on activities. A study by Ajoke (2017) found a significant difference in performance of students taught using instructional materials and those who were taught without. The study revealed that students taught with instructional materials performed quite better than those taught without. This shows the importance of instructional materials in the teaching-learning process as it aids the acquisition and retention of knowledge.

3.5 Supervisor-supervisee relationship as a challenge faced by student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic

Supervision of instruction is key in improving classroom practices and enhancing the teacher's professional growth (Apolot et al., 2018). During school practice, university supervisors are mandated to support student teachers in and outside classroom environments in order to strengthen their professional capabilities. Supervisors are expected to observe student teachers' lessons, provide guidance and support as well as giving constructive feedback (Thobega & Miller, 2008). However, not all supervisors do their tasks as required. In the current study, research participants cited poor relationship between school practice supervisors and student teachers. Analysis of student teachers' reflective reports showed that, 29 respondents, representing 20% cited poor supervisor-supervisee relationship as one of the challenges they faced during school practice. This finding substantiates the qualitative findings where supervisor-supervisee relationship was mentioned as the major challenge that affected student teacher's performance while they were conducting school practice during COVID-19 pandemic. One student teacher lamented during the reflective meeting: *"some supervisors are very harsh. Instead of correcting you they back at you. You are not given time to explain yourself. Instead, they want to find faults. This was a challenge!"* (Reflective meeting, January, 2021). Another one adds *"...it is not proper for the supervisor to call you stupid. He has to listen from your side of the story. Some of them gives contradicting information which when followed, the other supervisors take you to be stubborn"* (Student no. 45). *"..... some of the supervisors could not give technological guidance on the subjects which they did not specialise on. When you ask for guidance, they do not give..."* (Student no. 30). One of the student teachers also added that most of their heads of departments and some senior teachers who could have acted as their mentors/coach were very rare at school (Student no. 03). The above findings are in line with Apolot et al., (2018) who found in their study that some student teachers were not satisfied with the skills and knowledge of some school practice supervisors. The study highlighted unsatisfactory guidance from supervisors with inadequate supervision skills and specialised knowledge of some subjects/content. Additionally, Mapfumo and Chitsiko, (2012) found that poor supervisor-supervisee relationship was one of the causes of stress among student teachers. Some of the support required by student teachers include system information, finding instructional materials, instructional strategies, emotional support and assistance in classroom management and discipline (Thobega & Miller, 2008). This is important because close supervision of student teachers by their supervisors results to the development of student teachers' orientation, disposition, conceptions and classroom practice (Marais & Meier, 2008).

3.6 Classroom management as a challenge faced by student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic

Student academic achievement depends on the close relationship between students and their teachers in the process of teaching and learning. This can be achieved through effective classroom management. Classroom management involves creating and

sustaining an orderly learning environment and enhancing students' social and moral growth (Chandra, 2017). However, findings from this study found out that student teachers experienced challenge with classroom management while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. Quantified responses from 19% of the student teachers indicated that classroom management was one of the challenges experienced. Compared to other challenges, as low as 28 responses, representing 19% claimed that they experienced a problem with classroom management. These challenges according to the student teachers were classroom organisation in line with the COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), classroom control and learners' failure to follow guidelines on putting on face mask, washing of hands regularly and observing social distancing of about two metres in and out of class. *"One big challenge teaching during COVID-19 was following SOPs. Learners did not want to put on their masks (Student no. 33). "... we risked our lives teaching during coronavirus period. Some students became our enemies in class because they could not listen to our advice of putting on masks..."* (Reflective meeting, January 2021). *"Teaching was rather difficult because we were restricted to only very few techniques of teaching that encouraged observance of SPOs. I could not organise learners in groups. I could not demonstrate close to the learners. Movement in class was restricted (Student no. 12).* The finding is in congruent with the study by Marais and Meier, (2008) who found out that most student teachers experienced moral decay in the schools and neglect of discipline. The respondents in their study described a school as a place where violence was a common reality; a place where students would fight one another and have no respect for adults. Similarly in this study, one of the student teachers expressed concern about indiscipline from some learners. *"..... it is unfortunate that some learners do not have respect for us. They think we are their equals...."* (Reflective meeting, January 2021). This is in line with Apolot et al., (2018) who found out that most respondents pointed out low respect from their learners who believed they were unqualified teachers with low level of professional knowledge and skills to teach. In addition, Mapfumo and Chitsiko, (2012) reported that problems of difficult learners where the major source of stress for student teachers during their teaching practice.

3.7 Time constraint as a challenge faced by student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic

The study found out that time constraint was a major challenge while they were on school practice during COVID-19 as suggested by 29 responses, representing 20%. During this crisis time, most schools wanted to complete the syllabi for candidate classes and so the student teachers felt they were allocated too much content to cover within a short time. Due to too much work load, student teachers could not get enough time to prepare schemes of work and lesson plans as expressed here. *"..... I was allocated many periods in a week. I used to teach daily from morning to evening, sometimes also at night...."* (Student no 19). *"..... most senior teachers transferred their lessons to us and left school. We could not get ample time to prepare our lessons...."* (Reflective meeting, January 2021). This situation could have been coupled with the inadequate science teachers in the region who had a

chance to part time elsewhere as student teachers covered up their lessons in their mother schools. The lack of science teachers in rural areas have been on record for decades now. Komakech and Osuu (2014) found out that there were insufficient science teachers in most rural schools. The study also discovered that most of the teachers available are unqualified and overloaded. The study on school practice supervision and performance of student teachers in higher institutions of learning in Uganda by Apolot et al., (2018) revealed that student teachers experienced time constraint due to too much work load imposed on them. As such student teachers could not get time to prepare and plan their lessons adequately and in time. The study also found out that most of the senior teachers found it as a relief to divert their interest elsewhere and thus, transferred all their work load to student teachers. An act that it is described as unethical since it affects the productivity of student teachers.

3.8 The coping strategies improvised by student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic

The student teachers were asked to report on coping strategies they employed to withstand the challenges they encountered while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. Themes generated from the reflective reports and reflective meeting are presented in the table below.

Table 3: Findings from qualitative data analysis

Research questions	Generated themes
Question 1: What were the coping strategies improvised by student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic?	Theme 1: Personal strategies (cognitive, physical, behavioural and rational) Theme 2: Professional strategies (knowledge of curriculum, self-management, adaptive) Theme 3: Social strategies (interpersonal relationship, team work, collaboration)

The results in Table 3 above shows that student teachers employed numerous strategies to cope with challenges experienced while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. These strategies were categorised as personal strategies, professional and social strategies.

Data from school practice reflective meeting and reports recognised personal strategies as being physical, cognitive, behavioural and rational. Student teachers reported that they were able to manage stress mounted on them due to hectic school practice during COVID-19 through involvement in physical activities such as doing exercise, recreational activities and watching television or listening to music after lessons. *"I managed stress through jogging and listening to gospel music after classes (Student no. 13). "... physical exercises helped me to forget what happened in the class but also preparing the body to resist the virus..." (Student no. 17).* This strategies was found to be effective in the study conducted by Mapfumo and Chitsiko, (2012), where student teachers reported that physical coping methods they used to cope with school practice stress were in the form of sport and active creation of leisure activities.

Student teachers also reported applying cognitive strategies in handling stressors. This included setting realistic expectations and thinking positively as reflected in the following quotes: “... *Having an open mindset helped cope with this difficult situation. I thought I was not the only one in this situation...*” (Student no. 23). One student wrote: “*I applied the theory of pragmatism that is seeking practical solutions to the problem*” (Student no. 33). “... *I managed stress by engaging in routines that did not require a lot of brain work. This helped me to offload all the stress I had...*” (Student no. 10). Previous studies revealed that when student teachers were faced with stressful conditions, they employed physical and cognitive strategies to overcome the situation. Gustems-Carnicer et al., (2019) reported that student teachers effectively used logical analysis and positive reappraisal to overcome stress. Student teachers further used logical analysis to understand and mentally prepare for a stressor and its consequences. On the other hand, they used positive reappraisal to interpret and restructure a stressing situation positively while still acknowledging the reality of the situation.

The second theme that emerged was professional strategies in managing stress by student teachers. Professional coping strategies involved adequate preparation, self-management and accomplishing professional responsibilities in time. Student teachers recognised the importance of adequate planning in coping with stress associated to school practice. Research participants attributed effective teaching to prior planning and preparation of lessons. “*I planned my lessons early enough to avoid rushing at the last moment. This helped me to avoid stress*” (Student no. 17). One student teacher noted that effective classroom control and having self-confidence when handling student’s disruptive behaviours while teaching helped them to manage stressful situations while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic (Student no. 37). This is in line with previous studies. Murray-Harvey et al., (2010) and Lampadan, (2014) in their studies concluded that student teachers acknowledged that adequate and timely preparation was key in reducing anxiety. However, no student teacher in Mapfumo and Chitsiko, (2012) study stated that they managed stress by planning and rationalising their activities. This means that these student teachers either could have used avoidance or short-term coping strategies instead of Approach coping strategies. Literature shows that student teachers who used Approach strategies such as seeking social support and self-management adapt better than those who apply avoidance coping strategies (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019). Väisänen, Pietarinen, Pyhältö, Toom, and Soini (2018) recommended that student teachers should be encouraged to learn both self and co-regulative coping strategies such as learning to manage time, setting and prioritising study goals.

Finally, it also emerged that student teachers used social coping strategies such as talking to colleagues, cooperating teachers, supervisors or even their parents and relatives about their feelings. “*I managed the stressing situation by sharing with my fellow student teachers about my class. I would ask them how they manage to enforce COVID-19 standard operating procedures (SOPs) such as social distancing and putting on face masks*” (Student no. 19). “*I developed good relationship with my supervisors. When things were hard, I talk to them. I ask them how to manage a difficult class. And they supported me*” (Student no.

39). Student teachers also recognised working as a team and collaborating with colleagues as strategies that enabled them cope with different stressors. A study by Murray-Harvey et al. (2010), revealed that student teachers acknowledged that positive student teacher-supervisor relationship was the primary coping strategies during their school practice. Hadar, Ergas, Alpert, and Ariav, (2020) in their study on rethinking teacher education in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous (VUCA) world: student teachers’ social-emotional competencies during the Covid-19 crisis, advised that student teachers need to be equipped with social-emotional competence to prepare them to deal with a VUCA world.

3.9 Lessons learnt by student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic

The student teachers were asked to report on the lessons learnt while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. Themes generated from the reflective reports and reflective meeting are presented on the table below.

Table 4: Findings from qualitative data analysis on lessons learnt by student teachers

Research questions	Generated themes
Question 3: What lessons did student teachers learn while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic?	Theme 1: Adaptiveness Theme 2: Collaboration Theme 3: Creativity Theme 4: Uniqueness of learners

The question explored the lessons learnt by student teachers while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. Four categories of lessons learnt were adaptiveness, collaboration, creativity and uniqueness of learners, as presented in the table 4 above.

From the qualitative findings shown in table 4 above, student teachers learnt adaptative skills from their vast experiences while on school practice during COVID-19. Student teachers learnt that being flexible helps in adjusting and managing challenging situations like COVID-19 pandemic. *“During school practice I learnt to be flexible in order to take control of the difficult situation.... (Student no. 22). “I learnt to be open to change. I survived school practice because I learnt not to be rigid”* added Student no. 17. The same lesson was reported by Lampadan, (2014), where student teachers reported that they learnt to be flexible and adaptive to challenging situations. According to Flores and Gago, (2020), school closures and disruptions was an opportunity for student teachers to learn from the diverse experience of learning to teach in disruptive times. In order to prepare student teachers to manage difficult times, Hadar et al., (2020) advised that student teachers should be equipped with resilience and socio-emotional competence such as social awareness, self-awareness and regulations, among others

While teaching during COVID-19 pandemic, student teachers learned to collaborate. Collaboration with fellow student teachers, teacher mentors and learners were valued by most student teachers in order to gain support of others. *“One lesson I have learnt from this school practice was the power of collaboration. We could discuss with colleagues how to go about difficult classes”* (Student no. 05). The student teachers believed

that difficult times needed concerted efforts in order to manage their school practice activities. Grudnoff (2011) highlighted the importance of practicum as a collaborative endeavour that is intended to develop in the student teachers a sense of understanding of shared roles and responsibilities among student teachers. Similarly, Väisänen et al. (2018) reported that if student teachers are given opportunities to learn how to use social resources and collegial support during school practice, then chances are high that they will grow into resilient teachers who will withstand teacher burnout.

Furthermore, creativity was one of the skills learnt by student teachers as they tried to cope with challenges of teaching during COVID-19. Student teachers reported in their reflective journals that they learnt to be creative in selecting diverse teaching methods to use to support students who were showing signs of worry because of COVID-19. They reported that they learnt how to improvise teaching materials in order to make learning interesting. *"I learnt to be creative in order not to bore my students"* (Student no. 18). *"I learnt to improvise teaching materials to support my teaching"* (Student no. 11). The above incidences call for more time devoted to enhancing student teachers' capacities to think more creatively in order to become highly competent teachers. In deed Omara et al., (2021) stated that in teaching, creativity, imagination and improvisation are key performance drivers.

Lastly, student teachers learnt that learners were unique and needed to be handled differently. This is a wakeup call to teachers to respect the uniqueness of learners as they present different needs, interests and aspirations. One student in his reflective report wrote: *"I noticed three groups of learners in my class. The first group loved studies; the second group liked to be noticed, so they play a lot and the third group are those who were not interested in class activity"* (Student no. 01). *"For the slow learners, I used lower level of Bloom's taxonomy to set for them recall questions to encourage them and make them catch up with the fast learners"* (Student no. 44). Chandra (2017) believes that because of the uniqueness of learners, unique teaching strategies may be adopted for different types of learners.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

From literature reviewed and from findings of this study, it can therefore be concluded that school practice is vital in teacher preparation. However, from the findings of this study, student teachers reported several challenges they faced while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. These included placement, inadequate instructional materials, supervisor-supervisee relationship, classroom management and time constraint as the major challenges faced. The results showed that student teachers employed numerous strategies to cope with challenges experienced while teaching during COVID-19 pandemic. These strategies were categorised as personal strategies, professional and social strategies. Four categories of lessons learnt were adaptiveness, collaboration, creativity and uniqueness of learners.

The study recommend that the university should set clear guidelines as regards placement of student teachers to avoid them getting demotivated with the unreliable

mode of placement. The university and department of education should encourage school practice supervisors to treat school practice supervision as a professional support to student teachers. School administrators and cooperating teachers should provide mentorship services to student teachers.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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