



Research Article

Online Student Teaching Practicums During COVID-19: A Successful Case in the UAE

ممارسات تدريس الطلاب عبر الإنترنت خلال كوفيد-١٩: حالة ناجحة في الإمارات العربية المتحدة

Tania Aghar and Phil Quirke

Higher Colleges of Technology

ORCID

Tania Aghar: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7550-2206>

Corresponding Author: Tania

Aghar; email: talaghar@hct.ac.ae

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Abstract

The COVID-19 outbreak necessitated a sudden shift to online teaching and learning worldwide in early 2020. This impacted the preservice teachers' (PTs) practicums in schools—a cornerstone of Bachelor of Education programs. The teaching practicum (TP) enables PTs to apply their theoretical learning practically. We narrate the shift to e-practicum at a higher education institute in the UAE; document the challenges faced, opportunities gained, and guidelines designed for the implementation; and recognize the vital role of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the national federal higher education institutions in facilitating online teacher education. We describe the registration of PTs on the MoE's online teaching and learning platform (MS Teams) and the measures that facilitated the e-practicum. The study employs a case study approach to document analysis of email correspondence and interview scripts to provide insights from the preservice and mentor school teachers. Content and thematic analyses indicate that despite the resistance and unpreparedness of PTs toward this transition—the use of unfamiliar technology—they benefitted from the e-practicum and developed strategies to allay fears, keep students on task, and overcome technical challenges with the support of their mentors. We conclude with the lessons learned and recommendations for post-pandemic TP design.

الملخص

إن تفشي جائحة كوفيد-١٩ في أوائل عام ٢٠٢٠، استلزم تحولاً مفاجئاً إلى التدريس والتعلم عبر الإنترنت في جميع أنحاء العالم، وقد أثر هذا على التدريبات العملية لمعلمي ما قبل الخدمة (PTs) في المدارس- الذي يعتبر حجر الزاوية في برامج البكالوريوس في التعليم. حيث يتيح التدريب العملي للتدريس (TP) لأخصائيي التدريس تطبيق تعليمهم النظري عملياً. وتحدث هنا عن التحول إلى التدريب العملي في معهد التعليم العالي في الإمارات العربية المتحدة؛ والتحديات التي تمت مواجهتها والفرص المكتسبة والمبادئ التوجيهية المصممة للتنفيذ؛ ونمى الدور الحيوي لوزارة التربية والتعليم (MOE) ومؤسسات التعليم العالي الاتحادية الوطنية في تسهيل تعليم المعلمين عبر الإنترنت. نحن نصف تسجيل المعلمين على منصة التعليم والتعلم عبر الإنترنت التابعة لوزارة التربية والتعليم (MS Teams) والتدابير التي سهلت التدريب العملي الإلكتروني. تستخدم هذه الدراسة منهج دراسة الحالة لتحليل مستندات مراسلات البريد الإلكتروني وسيناريوهات المقابلات لتقديم رؤى من معلمي ما قبل الخدمة والمرشدين. وتشير تحليلات المحتوى والموضوعات إلى أنه على الرغم من مقاومة وعدم استعداد معلمي ما قبل الخدمة (PTs) تجاه هذا الانتقال -- استخدام تقنية غير مألوفة- فقد استفادوا من التدريب العملي الإلكتروني وطوروا استراتيجيات لتهدئة المخاوف، وإبقاء الطلاب في مهمة، والتغلب على التحديات التقنية بدعم من مرشديهم.

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نختتم بالدروس المستفادة وبتوصيات لتصميم تدريب عملي للتدريس (TP) لحقبة ما بعد الجائحة.

Keywords: *E-learning, Reflection on practice, E-practicum, Preservice teachers, Mentor school teachers*

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم الإلكتروني، التفكير في الممارسة، التدريب العملي الإلكتروني، معلمو ما قبل الخدمة، معلمو المدارس المرشدون.

1. Introduction

1.1. Practice teaching in teacher education

Teacher education programs aim to prepare preservice teachers (PTs) to meet the challenges of 21st-century demands by equipping them with the requisite knowledge and skills. Therefore, school-based experiences, such as a teaching practicum (TP), should be a fundamental part of any robust academic program as they are authentic in contrast to the simulated situations offered in some tertiary education courses. TP is an indispensable component of any teacher education program because it allows student teachers to link theory with practice in a classroom setting (Allen & Wright, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Eisner, 2002; Nemtchinova, 2018) and forms an essential element of initial teacher preparation (Anderson & Stillman, 2013). Conderman et al. (2013) further assert that the TP experience guarantees a supported entry to the profession and that recent graduates are aware of the influential component of the TP as they recognize the benefits of student teaching and early direct interactions. Thus, the extant research regards TP as foundational in developing PTs' teaching skills (Goldhaber & Ronfeldt, 2020).

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions had to transition from face-to-face classroom teaching to emergency remote teaching (Flores & Gago, 2020; Nel & Marais, 2020). One of the major impacts of this transition was that teacher education programs could not offer their PTs the full school-based practicum experience. Consequently, the need to ensure that PTs completed their TP and met their graduation requirements meant that higher education institutions (HEIs) had to quickly adapt, modifying program requirements and the conditions in which both education faculty and schools—sites of school-based teaching practice—operated (Mpofu, 2020; Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to narrate the shift to online TP of one teacher education program at an HEI in the UAE. First, we provide a context for the HEI, including the key features of its education TP program. Second, we examine the theoretical framework underpinning the study and review the relevant literature describing how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the education systems in the UAE, particularly the TP. We present a brief distinction of e-learning categories and review similar pertinent studies—with a focus on those that shifted from in-person to virtual learning environments during the lockdown of universities and schools. The remaining sections detail the study methodology, the results, the challenges faced, and the lessons learned for a post-pandemic world. We present inputs from PTs and their MSTs, highlighting the importance of both voices in the program. Finally, we provide recommendations and conclusions.

1.2. Research context

The study reviews the experiences of one teacher education program at the largest HEI in the UAE as they transitioned to an online TP. This HEI embraces a community of more than 20,000 students and 2000 staff based on 17 technologically-enhanced campuses across the country. This institution is distinguished for its leadership in applied and technological education, which is predominantly followed in the Education Division's programs. Through its Early Childhood program, the Faculty of Education equips its graduates with opportunities every semester to practice the skills they have learned at college—in schools and other learning environments—under the mentorship of experienced teachers. This hands-on approach to learning provides students with the teaching skills they need to excel in their future careers and is accomplished through six education practicum courses (EPC) spread over four years. The EPC courses emphasize applying knowledge and skills in the classroom and ensure that the PTs are better prepared for the classroom environment than most graduates (Programs and Curriculum, Academic Affairs, 2021; Quirke, 2018).

1.3. Key program features

The key features of the TP program are a reflection on practice, planning as a part of practice, teaching competencies, mentoring, observation, and assessment. Reflection is a vital part of teaching and an essential component of the teaching practice courses as it underscores the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program. Reflection on practice is a critical competency for all practicum courses, and PTs must reflect on all aspects of their training during their TP. Like any aspect of teaching, this should be based on sound educational

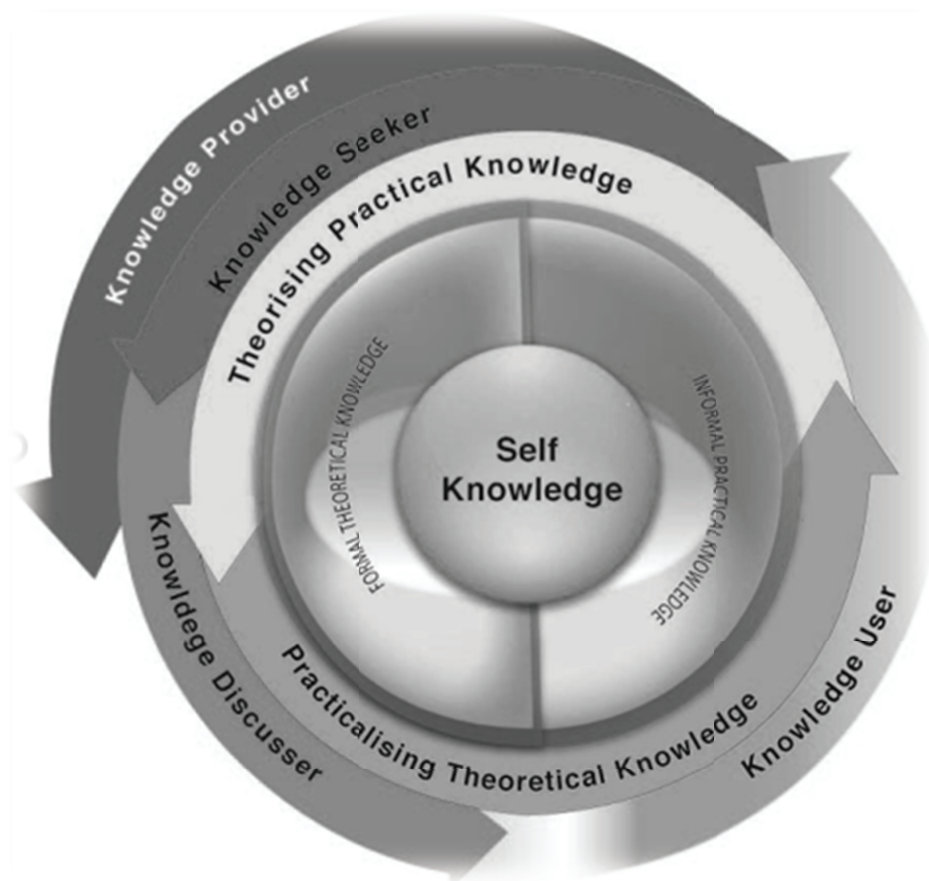
theory, which is a vital component of each practicum course. The mentor college teachers (MCTs) ensure that PTs have the foundational theoretical background to lead them through the reflection process in each program year. The MCTs teach PTs how to organize and reflect on aspects of teaching, student learning, and broader educational matters to develop the PTs' pedagogy. Quirke (2018) emphasizes the importance of reflection as it focuses on teaching aspects, allowing PTs to deconstruct the dynamics entailed in both successful and less successful experiences. This process leads to greater insight, facilitating learning and skill development. With PTs, reflective writing can be used in several ways to develop deeper perspectives, knowledge, and skills (Burton et al., 2009). One approach is reflective writing typology, developed by Burton (2005), forming the basis of this B.Ed. program's approach to reflection. The reflective writing typology is presented as a series of steps that move teachers from simply describing what happened in the classroom to deeper theorizing that encourages them to examine their beliefs about language, learning, pedagogy, and psychology.

In Year One, MCTs encourage PTs to describe their TP observation and micro-teaching experiences in detail using "what" and "how" questions. As PTs move into Year Two of the B.Ed. Program, MCTs encourage them to explore their practicum experience in greater breadth and detail using type one and two "what" and "how" questions, extend beyond description, and link their practical reflections to their theoretical studies. This greater depth in reflection is triggered using type three "why" questions as trainees begin to theorize on their practice. In Year Three, PTs review earlier reflections and explore their teaching philosophy in groups and examine their reflective writing over the previous four semesters as a sequence—demonstrating their growth as learner teachers. Predominantly using type three "why" questions, MCTs encourage learners to explore early practicum experiences, reflect on how they would approach those earlier experiences differently, and tie the different experiences they have reflected on to consistent theories beginning to inform their teaching practice. In Year Four, this depth of reflective writing is transposed onto the trainees' capstone research projects—driven by theory linked to and developed from practice (Quirke, 2018; Appendix A summarizes the EPC progression scheme from Years One to Four).

To conclude, the B.Ed. program foregrounds TP in schools in its approach. Faculty course teams annually review the program—based on feedback from students, faculty, school teachers, heads of faculty, and school principals, and Ministry of Education (MOE) representatives (the critical employers of the program's graduates). This dynamic program quality review cycle ensures that the program is aligned with the national school curriculum changes (Quirke, 2018).

Figure 1

The contemporary model (Quirke, 2009).



1.4. Theoretical framework

Learning to teach “requires experiences and settings which support reflection, collaboration, relational learning, and the creation of communities of inquiry” (Beattie, 1997, p. 126) and a conviction that “a professional knowledge of teaching has many dimensions—cognitive, social, organizational, practical, moral, aesthetic, personal, political, and interpersonal” (Beattie, 1997, p. 126). The theoretical model of teacher knowledge (Figure 1) provides a diagrammatical representation of how teachers construct and process knowledge as “a collaborative effort, a reflective process, a situated experience, and a theorizing opportunity” (Johnson, 2002, p. 1), and this is the foundation of the teacher education program described in this study.

This contemporary model (Quirke, 2009) uses reflective writing to build the bridge between academic research and classroom practice by theorizing practical knowledge and practicalizing theoretical knowledge.

2. Literature Review

We begin with a description of how the COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated dramatic changes in education systems in the UAE and impacted PTs' preparation programs. Further, we distinguish between two e-learning categories and review similar studies on the shifting of practicum placements from in-person to virtual learning environments due to the lockdown of universities and schools.

2.1. COVID-19 and the associated educational challenges

On March 3, 2020, the UAE's MOE announced that schools and universities would close for a month starting March 8 (The National, 2020). The spring break, scheduled to begin on March 29, 2020 was brought forward to March 8 and lasted for two weeks (Gulf News, 2020). Students studied from home for the remaining two weeks, and "distance learning" was introduced. The two-week online "distance learning" program was extended from March 30 until the end of the academic year in June. The UAE advisory asked all Emirati students abroad, whose universities were closed, to return to the Emirates (Emirates 24/7, 2020).

With the schools shutting, the education system changed dramatically, and teaching was conducted remotely and on digital platforms. Closing schools and shifting to online learning had severe consequences and posed a further challenge for the student-teachers who needed to go to schools to complete their practicum courses.

Furthermore, the abrupt need to adapt to online teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the digital readiness of teachers and students world-wide (Bao, 2020; Demuyakor, 2020; International Association of Universities, 2020). Educators had limited time to prepare for such a significant shift in teaching and learning. Although digital technologies have consistently been implemented as a regular part of learning in the 21st-century, the unexpected change to e-learning has undeniably affected both students and educators. Educators had to manage and deliver education either synchronously or asynchronously.

2.2. Synchronous vs. asynchronous learning

Synchronous e-learning is an online study, in real-time, through videoconferencing. This virtual classroom is an environment where students can immediately ask questions and use instant messaging to communicate and interact with their teachers and peers. In contrast, asynchronous learning can be conducted offline, in the student's own time,

and at their own pace. Asynchronous e-learning entails coursework delivered online, uploaded to an online forum, or sent via email or a message board (e-learning glossary, 2020).

Some educational institutions adopted a combination of synchronous and asynchronous classwork and instruction. According to the literature, synchronous learning is closer to traditional classroom education, where the instructor and the students are available simultaneously on the same virtual platform. It can occur through lectures, discussions, and online tutorials. It offers different ways of interaction, sharing and collaboration, flexibility, and personalized learning opportunities (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005). The teacher can monitor students' attendance and participation, similar to the face-to-face classroom setting. Therefore, synchronous learning is associated with greater discipline, punctuality, and higher attendance rates. Students will avail themselves on time, knowing that the lesson will be missed if they do not attend on time. Moreover, it allows participation in meaningful face-to-face online interactions (Harris et al., 2009; Hrastinski, 2008; Simonson et al., 2012) and increases in-depth knowledge because students will raise issues through quality class interactions (Hrastinski, 2008).

Despite the advantages of synchronous instruction, Hughes (2014) references the disadvantages of synchronous educational delivery online, mentioning students having to adhere to time schedules with the learning pace set by the teacher. In addition, he argues that students may not receive the individual attention they may need. In contrast, he discusses the advantages of asynchronous learning, where students learn better from interacting with, watching, reading, and listening to different types of content. Synchronous modules benefit learners as they are free to complete the coursework at their own pace, according to their individual needs. With an asynchronous approach, students can revise concepts they need to focus on, spend more time on these, and review related resources. This strategy could alleviate fatigue in students as they manage their own time and learn at a pace that suits their educational, social, and emotional needs. Flaherty (2020) states that a more intentional mix of live and asynchronous classwork is necessary for future remote courses.

Despite these academic and pedagogical discussions on the benefits of and preferences for either synchronous or asynchronous modes, TP requirements for graduation and employment meant that synchronous attendance with students required implementation for the student teachers. Therefore, the MOE and the Deans of the three federal universities met to initiate a plan to place over a thousand student teachers in e-practicum opportunities through the school video platforms and learning management systems.

2.3. Review of online practicum studies

A review of studies conducted on online practicums during the COVID-19 pandemic and their contributions to the field provides a valuable foundation for our research. Ersin and Atay (2021), in their qualitative study, explored online mentoring experience from the perspectives of PTs. PTs reported an overall positive online mentoring experience. For example, PTs revealed that they received sufficient contextual and technological support when needed. However, they expected their mentors to allocate more time and their university supervisors to control practicum schools and provide more online teaching samples and guidelines. Nel et al. (2021) provided two conceptual tools collaboratively developed by TP educators and mentor teachers. The authors aimed to benefit other university school partnerships in re-designing TP programs. They also emphasized the need for more practice-based and engaging supplements to the traditional school-based placement, providing quality representations, approximations, enactment, and reflection opportunities for PTs. Ersin et al. (2020) designed an *e-practicum* under the supervision of the university supervisor, who acted as the *e-mentor*. The author's rationale was to increase PTs' teaching competence and prepare them for online teaching. The authors set up a virtual classroom for microteaching using Zoom consisting of 25 PTs. Six PTs conducted lessons for their peers who played the role of students. The student-teachers received detailed feedback from peers and e-mentoring from university supervisors after the e-practicum sessions, followed by PTs' reflections on both the e-practicum experience and e-mentoring. The overall experience helped PTs overcome their fears about online teaching.

Similarly, Korucu-Kış (2021) assessed whether a collaborative virtual application could create meaningful learning for 11 PTs by engaging them in vicarious experiences using Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. The author reported that the intervention process was associated with positive outcomes, mainly improving practicum students' domain-specific knowledge and skills. PTs said this experience supported them during remote practicum and contributed positively to their development. Jin (2022) also investigated the online teaching experiences of PTs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The author used comparative analysis to assess the work of three PTs—family reflection papers, lesson reflection papers, and video recordings—from two courses. The analysis revealed that it was challenging for the participants to keep the children active and engaged because they could not observe the children's learning process. The study reports the success of PTs in overcoming challenges by employing different strategies such as modeling, a child-centered approach, and patience, pointing to the power of pedagogical resilience.

Özkanal et al. (2020) examined PTs' reflections while teaching English in an emergency remote teaching platform, Educational Information Network TV, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants' reflections revealed that they appreciated three essential components of a practical lesson involving the students: teachers' body language, realia as material use, and activities. Additionally, PTs noted the lack of interaction during online education, particularly for language learning lessons, with some reservations about material and activity choices.

At a micro level in the UAE, Hojeij and Baroudi (2021) explored the effectiveness of remote TP and its impact on developing PTs' teaching practices, classroom management skills, and the use of online resources with a small cohort of four PTs. Their analysis of open-ended interviews, journal entries, and written reflections revealed several benefits of increasing students' engagement, interaction, and collaboration. Participants believed that implementing the collaborative learning approach deepened students' learning and expanded their knowledge. The authors conclude by presenting a practical framework based on the dimensions above. The framework is intended to assist curriculum designers of teacher preparation programs in ensuring effective online teaching and enhancing students' learning experience and growth.

Based on the extensive literature review conducted for this research, other studies about online TP during COVID-19 in the UAE have not yet been published. Therefore, this case study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting principles that can be applied to future e-practicum implementations and elicit issues for future studies.

2.4. Research Methodology

The study took place in the Education program of an HEI in the UAE in the spring semester of the 2020–2021 academic year, during which an online practicum was implemented in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the phenomenon's novelty and the study's aim, we selected a qualitative research design and a single case study approach to discern the meaning of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Creswell (2013) adds that a case study is useful when the research focuses on a program, event, or activity involving individuals. Therefore, a case study is advantageous because it thoroughly describes the participants' experiences to identify categories and themes to describe the case and further elicit contemporary issues for future studies. Thus, the small-scale research project was designed as a single case study to narrate the shift of the examined teacher education program in relation to the remote practicum component. It further examines insights of the PTs and the MSTs into the e-practicum.

2.5. Participants

The sample included in the study was selected via purposeful sampling through which the individuals are identified and selected based on their knowledge about or experience with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2007). The participants ($n = 26$) consisted of two groups. Group 1 included PTs from Year Three. According to the enrollment number, 130 female PTs were registered in Year Three; therefore, a random cluster of 10% of the total number was selected ($n = 13$) from one of the seven campuses. All PTs attended a compulsory online practicum. The PTs were placed in 13 different schools, during which they completed five weeks of online practicum and four macro teaching sessions, where they taught 40-minute-lessons under the supervision of an MST. They observed the teaching environment and continued completing their TP tasks and reflections while receiving constructive feedback from their MSTs and MCTs. All participants were Emirati, and their ages ranged between 19 and 21 years. They taught online English, science, and mathematics at the primary level (KG2 and Grades 1–3) to classes of 20–25 students. Group 2 consisted of the MSTs ($n = 13$) of the corresponding PTs, who were a mix of eight female Emiratis and five expatriates.

2.6. Data collection tool

Further, the novelty of the phenomenon necessitated a relevant data collection tool to document and analyze existing data. Using existing documents was an efficient and inexpensive method available to us. Documents can provide supplementary research data, making document analysis a beneficial method for most research where there is a danger of researchers imposing their meanings when interpreting the data. Document analysis can include substantial data and is helpful when contextualizing the research within a subject or field. Documents can also contain data that can no longer be observed, which suits the context of this study as it was conducted after the online TP was administered. Therefore, it is helpful as it provides details that participants may have forgotten and can help track change and development (Bowen, 2009). Finlay (2001) mentions that it is helpful for researchers to use the extensive existing data sources that are already collected and can be interpreted for different research purposes. Silverman (2000) adds that researchers should start from a familiar territory where they can work with close-to-hand and readily accessible data under exceptional and difficult circumstances.

Document analysis, however, is associated with subjectivity. O'Leary (2014) emphasizes the importance of thoroughly evaluating the documents' subjectivity to ensure

the research's credibility. Another disadvantage is that some documents might be incomplete or contain inaccurate or inconsistent data, leading to additional searching or reliance on more documents than planned (Bowen, 2009). To reduce subjectivity, we conducted a blind moderation review of the interview scripts and then used judgmental analysis to compare the accuracy of the interpretations.

Documents in this study were restricted to two types. Type one consisted of MST and PTs' email correspondence with the MCTs ($n = 33$). We extracted all email correspondence between the MSTs and the 13 PTs during the TP period. Type two consisted of institutional documents for 13 PTs, mainly the interview scripts that were available as a result of an oral post-assessment administered after the TP, during which students reflected orally on how they showed their commitment to their profession as teachers and took full advantage of the professional learning experience. Then, they reflect on how they planned, managed, implemented, and assessed learning. The recordings of the oral assessments administered via BlackBoard Learn Ultra were downloaded for analysis.

2.7. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using a combination of content and thematic analysis. Content analysis is the process of organizing information into categories related to the central questions of the research (Bowen, 2009). Accordingly, we conducted a first-pass document review to identify meaningful and relevant data. Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommended that researchers should make careful considerations to identify pertinent information and separate it from that which is not relevant. Thus, information not relevant to the online TP was excluded. Building on this, we conducted a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is characterized by carefully reviewing the data where the researcher uncovers themes pertinent to a phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). To maintain objectivity and sensitivity in selecting and analyzing data from documents, predefined codes may be used (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thus, we employed color-coding when organizing the data. We searched for information that coalesced around keywords such as "concerns," "advantages," and "technology fear." Then we categorized the data and labeled the categories with a general descriptive theme, for example, positive relationships with MSTs.

3. Results

The following section is divided into two parts. Part one presents a narrative of the shift to the online TP, including the planning and implementation. Part two presents the results from the document analysis, mainly the email correspondence and the assessment interviews.

3.1. Shifting to online practicum: Planning and implementation

Following the lockdown, TP coordinators had to design an alternative program to ensure the successful placement of PTs to meet their program accreditation requirements. The plan's underlying foundation and rationale were to have PTs complete their practicum period while experiencing online learning from the teacher's perspective. Furthermore, the plan aimed to enable the student-teachers to enjoy the learning experience so that they would be comfortable with the MOE system. A multidisciplinary effort led by the Dean of Education, the TP coordinators, and the MOE ensured that all students were given TP placement on the online learning management system at MOE schools. TP coordinators submitted the introductory applications for the PTs to ensure that security clearance requirements were met, and they also conducted further meetings with the school principals and MSTs via Zoom or MS Teams to explain the program and inform them about the newly updated guidelines for online TP. The MOE then allocated the schools and provided the login credentials for both the PTs and the MCTs. In addition, they published a comprehensive orientation video, guiding trainees and MCTs on how to access the MOE schools' platforms and the corresponding classroom.

Nel and Marais (2020) emphasize the need for structure and clear, concise guidelines to assist student-teachers while integrating technology and preparing materials for effective lessons. Therefore, education faculty and practicum system course teams worked in parallel to prepare their mentees for this innovative experience. First, they prepared new guidelines to ensure that PTs, MSTs, and MCTs could embrace the learning opportunities that this unique online learning and teaching situation provided. Moreover, the new guidelines catered to different individual scenarios to empower each team of MCT-MST-PT. The guidelines were explicitly crafted to reduce anxiety levels and concerns that might have been associated with this unfamiliar teaching–learning model, particularly with Year One students. The new guidelines ensured structure and great flexibility to suit individual cases (see Appendix B). The roles and responsibilities focused on having the PTs support the MSTs as best they can to deliver learning opportunities to the children at home and help the parents as required.

The first few days were characterized by exploration team meetings where each team (MST-MCT-PT) explored the best way they could work together and how the addition of the PT could help the MST with the increased workload created by online teaching. The debriefing meetings allowed for brainstorming, discovery, and agreement on communicating throughout the TP.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued, the guidelines were revised every semester, building on the experiences from the previous online TPs. Despite the flexibility associated with the newly revised guidelines, firm and fair adherence to the pre-pandemic expectations was maintained. As PTs represented their institution in the MOE Online Learning Environment, they adhered to the same attendance, punctuality, and professionalism requirements outlined in the TP booklets for each EPC course. They copied their MCTs on all their communications with the MSTs and created a page on their e-Portfolio to keep all these communications as evidence of professionalism. They maintained a record of their daily tasks, observations, reflections, and recommendations to MCT and MST on their e-Portfolio. PTs shadowed the MSTs as reflective observers for the first week. They documented the MST's daily workload and their own TP tasks in the e-Portfolio. They took advantage of the resource of extensive online lesson plans available from their MSTs and adapted them. They also recorded online planning meetings with their MST (e.g., through student-teacher notes).

PTs used various online tools—narrated slide presentations using the voice-over features and Nearpod lessons. Others created extra learning sessions. Online story-time with prerecorded read-aloud was also common. PTs developed additional home learning resources, including parent video guides. Most importantly, they ensured professionalism by maintaining digital etiquette, such as a suitable dress code and logging in 20 minutes earlier to load their presentations before the class. Similarly, they were proactive in dealing with anticipated technical problems by testing their audio, cameras, and connectivity before their classes to ensure they had ample time to troubleshoot. Some even piloted new apps or strategies through guided practice before allowing young learners to do it independently. PTs ensured that their virtual classroom space was well ordered by negotiating and sharing clear rules with learners.

MSTs concurrently held discussions and meetings with the PTs to familiarize them with the new system. PTs availed themselves of the novel opportunity to learn about online teaching and learning by reflecting on student/teaching interaction, practical instruction, active and personalized learning, effective use of technology, and assessment procedures. Therefore, MSTs played a significant role in preparing trainees for online classes outside their working hours. They worked closely with mentees to provide access to online lessons and e-books. They guided PTs and facilitated the completion

Table 1

Themes arising from the document analysis.

Theme	Participants	Method of data collection
Adaptability challenges	PTs	Email Correspondence
Lessons learned	PTs	Interview Scripts
MSTs’ support from the PT’s perspective	PTs	Interview Scripts
MST’s positive feedback	MSTs	Email Correspondence

of the assigned reflective tasks. Moreover, they accommodated and enhanced access to the curriculum for ease of lesson preparation. Finally, MSTs were prompt in providing constructive formative feedback. They also met MCTs—which would have been done during face-to-face TP—to evaluate the performance of mentees.

To sum up, the principles for the transition comprised four elements: professionalism, structured revised guidelines, flexibility, and most importantly, a multidisciplinary collaborative effort.

3.2. Preservice teachers and mentor school teachers’ responses

Four main categories emerged from the thematic analyses of the PTs’ and MSTs’ responses (see Table 1).

3.2.1. Theme 1: Adaptability challenges

PTs resisted the change, and some were unprepared for the virtual practicum. This is evident in PT 2’s words:

(PT 2) I know there is a positive side to this experience, but I really think there’s also a negative side I mean, I really can’t open the cam, and I’m not trained or ready I don’t want to fail or get a low grade and postpone my graduation or repeat the course, so I really want you to understand the situation due to the circumstances we are facing.

Some PTs were hesitant to turn on their cameras and expressed valid concerns about online privacy and safety:

Also, I’m really against opening my cam to teach the students because I really can’t trust who’s behind the devices with them, and I really can’t be comfortable about it I consider this a violation of my privacy.

A large group was concerned about all the coursework and assessments and this unfamiliar experience:

(PT12) We as students, are not entirely adapting to the new policy, and it is very uncomfortable for us. There are a lot of problems that face us, such as low internet connection during these days regarding the trouble situation that the world is facing.

Some students also found it difficult to multitask between teaching their siblings or family members, who were also studying online and meeting the academic requirements of other education courses:

(PT13) We are under a lot of pressure and we are facing the hardest time in our learning progress because of the situation and the anxiety that we feel. Also, we have a lot of responsibilities, and most of us help our kids or sister and brother in online learning.

To conclude, PTs struggled with technological integration and material preparation as they lacked experience in utilizing technology and digital materials.

3.2.2. Theme 2: Lessons learned

The PTs revealed that they initially lacked the necessary skills to manage the technology needed during online teaching but acquired new skills during the process:

(PT6) I learned how to use Nearpod, Kahoot, Quizz, and create a virtual background to make my lesson interesting.

(PT8) I never knew how to use live worksheets, but now I use them very well, and I will keep using them even when we go back to face-to-face TP.

(PT10) It was very difficult to share the screen and manage the students, but then I learned how to do it, and the same with muting and unmuting my students.

(PTs11) We developed flexibility, and we adapted quickly, of course, with the help of my MST and my friends, who were placed in the same school.

Therefore, there were advantages to the unfamiliar and stressful experience as PTs became familiar with technology and improved their strategies for keeping their students on task. Some PTs received positive feedback from their students:

(PT 13) The parents and students loved my morning message, and the students didn't want to leave the class after the lesson was finished.

To sum up, PTs received support in terms of technical and teaching support, positive relationships, communication, and care from their MSTs and the schools they were placed at.

3.2.3. Theme 3: MST support from the PT's perspective

Most students developed positive relationships with their MSTs by ensuring effective and professional communication through email correspondence, WhatsApp, and Telegram. Moreover, they revealed that they had received adequate support from their MSTs to cope with their challenges:

(PT 3) My MST helped me plan for each stage of my lesson. She also gave me feedback and showed me how to improve my teaching.

The MSTs provided practical advice on classroom management:

(PT 4) She helped me take charge of all the morning messages, and when I faced technical difficulties, she was very patient with me ... she also taught me how to help students not become sleepy.

(PT5) My MST taught me how to use teams and schedule meetings, and deal with restless students.

(PT 11) My MST showed me what to do when students finish early or don't understand what I am saying. She advised me to check for understanding before I move to the next activity.

The PTs were required to confirm that they were logged in on time and had all their resources ready as evidence of professionalism. Regarding the teaching and learning aspect, students revealed that the MSTs and the resources available on the MOE smart Learning Management Systems (LMS) were valuable when planning and implementing their lessons.

(PT12) I am now more prepared for the real world of teaching, and I can make any changes as I learned how to deal with new challenging situations because of my MST.

We concluded that the opportunities provided by the online TP outweighed the challenges. The PTs found the updated guidelines and the MSTs' support helpful in overcoming fears about online teaching.

3.2.4. Theme 4: MST's Positive Feedback

The email correspondence of the 13 MSTs indicated that the interaction between PTs and their MSTs was constructive. The MSTs acted as counselors and academic mentors:

(MST 6) PT went above and beyond in her teaching. She would come to school early and leave late. She even came on one of her days off to complete a task. It was amazing to see such professionalism from a young teacher. PT was always so flexible during her teaching practice. She had no problem rescheduling her lessons when unexpected events would arise, for example, the Expo trip to Dubai. Relationship building and collaborative teamwork are where PT excelled in her placement. We introduced team teaching where we would teach the class together every day. PT is a fantastic team player. She has fully dedicated herself and has been a wonderful addition to the classroom.

They maintained open communication with their PTs through virtual meetings and other social media platforms such as MS Teams, WhatsApp, and emails.

(MST5) PT showed her reflection in action skills on numerous occasions, for example, when the internet would fail in class. Her ability to remain calm and collected even during her observation when the fire drill happened. PT lesson reflections were detailed descriptions with thought given to future classes. PT has been a breath of fresh air in the classroom. I remember myself being in the classroom for the first time, and it is a daunting experience. However, PT has taken to the classroom like someone who has been teaching for years. She has helped me so much in class, and she is a credit to the University. Thank you for such an amazing PT.

They also provided dynamic feedback on the lesson plans received from the PTs.

(MST10) I am impressed with PT's ability to have a strong presence in the classroom. I have observed her grow in her voice, command of each lesson, as well as her plethora of skills and resources she uses to be flexible. Her dedication to daily planning before, during, and after work, hours is a testament to how much she enjoys education and cares for creating a learning environment that is nurturing and adaptive to students' needs. Her eclectic style of teaching to reach all her objective goals is immaculate. She builds daily connections with students and uses their interests as a basis for her instruction. There are no challenges that catch her off guard, and when things arise, she uses them as teaching and reflective points. PT stayed with me on many occasions after school to join my cluster science leader

meetings, parent conferences, meetings with administrators and parents to address behavior issues, science/ math team meetings, and staff meetings. PT was able to take on the challenge of teaching online simultaneously in a classroom with over 20 students. PT took on the initiative to cover classes without teachers available. She advised fellow training teachers and allowed herself to be a sounding board with other colleagues from Grade 1, TAs, and other grades. Her break time was used to create bulletin boards, enter assessment data, and give fist bumps to kids running by yelling, "Hey PT." As an educator, there is simply nothing she cannot do. I am proud to teach her as well as learn from her. She is an asset to our school, and we would enjoy having her back being an instrument of change that the students and staff need.

Most importantly, the MSTs revealed positive comments about the PTs regarding professionalism and punctuality, proper planning, dedication, and establishing rapport with the students. The quotations below support the solid and productive mentoring relationship between MSTs and PTs.

(MST3) I just want to take a second to thank you for the positive comments throughout for both the student teachers and myself. It is great to encounter someone who has similar views on education. Praise and encouragement are everything when dealing with young and old and I feel we both provided that for PT and the boys. It was a privilege to have someone with your expertise come visit our class and thank you again. I hope we meet again on our educational journey.

(MST7) I have attached comments about my wonderful experience with PT. I hope to have her back soon ... as a full-time teacher.

The quotation from the MST above indicates a strong and positive mentoring relationship and that they were able to connect to the PTs. Such a successful mentoring relationship, though formed in a new context, enabled PTs to independently explore, initiate strategies, and build innovative delivery content to their students, which made them more responsible.

4. Discussion

Disruptions to the physical TP were inevitable during the sudden COVID-19 outbreak. New dimensions of virtual TP had to be designed to provide field experience for the

PTs. Challenges and opportunities accompanied the new dimensions. In this study, we first documented the shift of the examined teacher education program in relation to the remote practicum component. We then employed document analysis to explore insights for the PTs and the MSTs into the experience of the remote TP.

PTs reported having a lack of preparedness for the shift, particularly when using and adapting to the unfamiliar technology, and this was echoed across the world by all teachers thrust into the virtual teaching environment (Ersin et al., 2020). Additionally, PTs found it challenging to turn on their cameras and meet the assessment requirements of other courses.

The PTs' resistance to the transition highlights the importance of the need to prepare PTs for online teaching. For example, Osman (2020) mentions that Sultan Qaboos University used a dedicated 24/7 hotline through WhatsApp to support PTs with technical issues and offered webinars and training to sharpen PTs' technological and design skills while using online tools for teaching and learning. Lack of preparedness could be frustrating when PTs have to perform hands-on activities, deal with very young learners or differentiate their activities. Similarly, Kim (2020) reported that PTs teaching kindergarten students struggled when they had to perform hands-on activities online, which is a critical part of teaching such young learners. Nel and Marias (2020) added that it was challenging for PTs to adjust the content to cater to individual needs. Catering to various individual needs requires students to multitask as they need to create different activities to suit individual needs (Nel & Marias, 2020; Kim, 2020). Osman (2020) adds that considering students' needs is a prerequisite for a successful teaching and learning process. This is possible primarily with "live interactions," where PTs could better know their learners' needs. Similar concerns were raised by Evagorou and Nisiforou (2020), who indicated that not all PTs showed a high level of readiness for online teaching, and Ersin et al. (2020) added that student teachers faced difficulty integrating technology and preparing material for online learning.

However, there were also advantages of the new experience where PTs developed better technological skills for using different platforms and various teaching methods and exploring strengths and teaching skills. PTs reported that the mentoring support from their MSTs enabled them to cope with unfamiliar technology. PTs found the updated guidelines and the MSTs' support helpful in overcoming online teaching fears. To them, online TP was challenging but a unique opportunity. Although they encountered some unexpected technical problems, they learned to adapt and overcome them. They also added that they are now better equipped to deal with online teaching. Finally, they developed better virtual classroom management skills. Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020) also note similar outcomes and report that online TP fostered more

opportunities for PTs to use unfamiliar software and tools and discover how to use online platforms to the maximum. Therefore, the online TP allowed PTs to think deeply about the socio-cultural setting surrounding the UAE students and families during the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the students' learning. The experience and willingness to face online teaching challenges and prepare lessons based on the student's needs and backgrounds in a novel setting have paved the way for PTs to become resilient and empathetic. Furthermore, Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020) indicated that the fact that PTs had to explore strategies and build new ideas to deliver content to students made them more responsible. They add that the experience of TP during the COVID-19 pandemic provided PTs with the opportunity to test their teaching skills and explore the skills to strengthen them.

The results generated from the email correspondence with the MSTs support the claim made by various scholars about the value of the mentoring partnership between school teachers, university instructors, and PTs in preparing PTs (Damar & Sali, 2013; Maphalala, 2013; Şimşek & Yıldırım, 2001). It also supports what other scholars say about the interaction between MSTs and PTs during online TP. For example, Nel and Marais (2020) mention that the interaction between PTs and their university lecturers and MSTs was more frequent and successful during online TP. They add that online TP allows MSTs to provide dynamic feedback and constructive support to further develop PTs' teaching skills. MSTs also reported that they established constructive rapport with their PTs, and they reported positive comments about the PTs' team-building skills, professionalism, working beyond duty hours, and relating well to students. Based on the findings, though limited in scope, we conclude that e-mentoring can be used to effectively exchange feedback and interaction between PTs and their students, peers, and MSTs (Quintana & Zambrano, 2014).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

TP forms the cornerstone of teacher education programs where PTs must apply their theoretical learning to a classroom practical to demonstrate their teacher competencies alongside a post-lesson reflection, linking the practice back to theory. The COVID-19 outbreak necessitated a cessation of face-to-face education and a sudden shift to online education. Provisions for changing the TP delivery had to be implemented, as the TP is one of the prerequisites for graduation for student teachers and a critical component in teachers' development. Despite the challenges associated with this rapid shift, the guidelines set by the Faculty of Education at the HEI reviewed in this study were conducive to ensuring that the online TP was achievable. The guidelines provided clear

and practical requirements to enhance the online TP ensuring a more robust approach to preparing PTs for online and digital platforms (Ersin et al., 2020) was implemented.

Therefore, the experience narrated by this study supports the claim that the TP should remain an essential requirement for teacher education and development under any circumstances. Educational institutions and students should be flexible and resilient to adapt to unexpected situations. The same experience presents new research opportunities. The support of the MOE, and their ability to accommodate more than 2000 PTs by making online platforms available and providing secure access to all participants whilst maintaining the same rigor and quality as in face-to-face attendance in schools was critical to the success of this project. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a reference for teacher education program providers to gain deeper insights into how education departments can adapt the TP to the constraints of online education, to allow PTs to undergo an effective teaching practice experience, and graduate without delays, having fulfilled all the school-based practicum requirements.

6. Limitations

This study employed a sample of 13 PTs and 13 MSTs; therefore, the results should be understood in the context of this small sample size. The documents examined were produced at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic when most participants struggled to adapt to the forced transition to remote TP. This is a limitation; further studies could explore documentation from the first two years of the pandemic and beyond. Given the large amount of data we had to process, we did not include information from the MCTs but chose to focus on the PTs and MSTs—as often unheard voices. Further research involving MCTs is planned, employing larger samples and mixed-method/quantitative approaches.

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The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Tania Al Aghar is an Assistant Professor and the Applied Research Coordinator at the Education Division of Higher Colleges of Technology. She is renowned for her experience in educational counselling, teacher training, and teacher education. In addition, she is a special needs expert and has constantly supported students with disabilities in Higher Education by devising assistive technology practices. Her main research interests are inclusive practices and fostering a versatile learning environment focused on career outcomes.

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Appendix A

Appendix B

6.1. Online Teaching Practicum Guidelines

Table 2

Summary of the Education Practicum Courses.

Year	Semester One	Semester Two	Practicum days
Year One: Beginning Teaching/First Phase	PTs observe, implement, and reflect upon learning highlighted in the education methodology courses in a primary and/or kindergarten setting.		10–15
	PTs undertake a minimum of two paired or individual teaching activities with small groups of students under the direct supervision of the School Mentor.	PTs teach a minimum of three paired or individual teaching activities to an entire class for part of a lesson. This should include a start, middle, and end of a lesson.	
Year Two: Emerging Teaching Second Phase	PTs implement coursework from corresponding courses in a setting appropriate for their degree concentration (ECE).		12–18
	PTs plan, deliver, and reflect upon a minimum of three paired or individual complete teaching sessions with an entire class under the guidance of the School Mentor.	PTs plan, deliver, and reflect upon a minimum of three paired or individual complete teaching sessions with an entire class or full lessons with small groups under the guidance of the School Mentor.	
Years Three and Four			
PTs then, in Year Three (Sustained Teaching), and for 15–20 days, progress to plan, deliver, and reflect upon a minimum of seven complete teaching sessions with an entire class, including four connected sessions in which they use formative assessment, reflection, and feedback to inform future planning. Year Four is characterized as the autonomous teaching phase where trainees plan, deliver, and reflect on a minimum of 60% of the School Mentor teaching time, including two full weeks of teaching, and taking on full-time responsibility of the School Mentor for 35–40 days.			

VERSION THREE 2020

With thanks to the MOE for giving our student-teachers this unique opportunity.

A Message to Our Student-teachers from the Executive Dean

Please note it is a requirement for program accreditation to complete these practicum days, and it is important for the MOE and ourselves that you continue to experience this new world from the point of view of a teacher in the schools.

This is a unique experience that you should not miss, and the days working with the MST in the MOE Online platforms can only be an exciting learning opportunity.

You, your MST, and MCT will liaise on what is best for you, the children, and the EPC Practicum course. Look at this NOT as a pressure-filled, stressful, anxiety-ridden situation but as an exciting, new, wonderful opportunity to demonstrate your creativity and talents in a supported environment where you can call on two professionals every step of the way.

This will be a special POSITIVE experience with teachers behind you, alongside you, and helping you ALL THE WAY.

We fully understand your concerns, and that is exactly why we have taken on board all the feedback from the last two semesters with the System Course Team Leaders for every EPC Teaching Practicum course working with their teams and your MCTs to ensure you have all the support you require during this semester. This should be a wonderful learning experience to help you gain confidence in your use of the MOE platform in the future. If you have any doubts about anything, just speak to your MST and MCT. The TP tasks have been adapted to the online learning environment, and you should be able to experience planning, observation, and reflection opportunities throughout the semester. All the tasks are aimed at giving you a unique opportunity to experience online learning from the teacher's perspective. The teaching practicums are set up so that you are fully supported all the way by both your MCT and MST, and have a completely unique, exciting learning experience

We have planned it out very carefully, and hopefully, you will be able to appreciate this throughout your TP experience. Remember if you have any difficulties, you have your MST, MCT, EPC teacher, and PTL Chair all standing by to help you.

Introduction

The aim of these guidelines is to ensure that students, Mentor school teachers (MSTs) and mentor college tutors (MCTs) embrace the learning opportunities that this unique online learning and teaching situation has provided us with.

We realize that every situation in every class will be different and that everyone is feeling different levels of anxiety and concern as we continue to experience the ongoing virtual teaching and learning environment. These guidelines have been drafted to assure each and every one of you that we all realize this and that our Online Teaching

Practicum is designed so that each team of MCT-MST-Student Teachers feels empowered. This semester's Online Teaching Practicum aims to give you all once again a unique and enjoyable learning and teaching experience.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Student-teacher is to support the MST as best they can to deliver learning opportunities to the children at home and help the parents as required. The MST is to provide the Student-teachers with opportunities to contribute to their work as best supports them. The MCT is to work with the MST and Student-teacher to complete the tasks that have been developed based on the last two semesters' online TP experiences and best practice to allow reliable and valid assessment of the student teacher's planning, teaching, and critical reflection skills. These tasks are aligned with those tasks normally completed during physical teaching practicum (TP) in the schools.

The first days of exploration

During the first few days, we recommend that each team (MST–MCT–Student-teacher) explores what is the best way they can work together and how the addition of the Student-teacher can help the MST with the increased workload we know online teaching has created. It is recommended that this would best be done at a team (MST–MCT–Student-teacher) debriefing meeting. This should be a period of exploration, brainstorming and discovery, and agreement on how best to communicate throughout the TP, building on the experiences from the last two semesters.

Expectations

Please note that Student-teacher are expected to adhere to the same attendance, punctuality, and professionalism requirements as laid out in the HCT Teaching Practicum booklets.

Remember you are representing the HCT in the MOE Online Learning Environment and we rely on you to make us proud of your professionalism, commitment, drive, and creativity as always.

Student-teacher should always copy the MCT on all their communications with the MST and also create a page on their e-Portfolio to keep all these communications. This will then be evidence of professionalism.

Any further task modifications required must be saved by the MCTs and shared with the Program Team Leaders and the Academic Program Chair so that a full record across all courses is available to everyone.

Everyone needs to be flexible, open to new ideas, stay in touch with each other, and mutually support each other.

Student Teachers should maintain a record of their daily tasks, observations, reflections, and recommendations to MCT and MST, and keep all these records in their e-portfolios.

Ideas from all-around

With thanks to the Education faculty and students for all the ideas below

Please note this is not an extensive list nor does any idea has to be adopted. Please continue to share your ideas so that any future versions of these online TP guidelines can have even more ideas listed. In this way, we can all continue to learn and grow from each other.

The ideas are in no particular order and can be adapted in any way the team sees fit:

Student Teacher-MST online collaboration for both synchronous and asynchronous online teaching as per school direction.

1. Document Student-teacher's daily tasks in the e-Portfolio
2. Document the MST daily workload and tasks
3. Adapt lesson plans
4. Record online planning meetings with MST (e.g., through Student-teacher notes)
5. Reflection on teaching competencies while on online TP
6. Shadow teaching and reflection
7. Prepare online teaching materials
8. Record online meetings with MST/MCT (only with agreement) and reflect on them
9. Reflection on online TP experience
10. Reflection on the online platform and how it has been and could be used
11. Alternative tasks for lesson observations as agreed by the team

12. Assessment of lesson and activity plans
13. Rationales and justifications for using a specific activity and how it relates to the learning outcomes
14. Use of student teachers in break-out rooms
15. Student-teacher read-alouds (these could be prerecorded)
16. Video recordings for children to watch independently.
17. Voice over presentations
18. Nearpod lessons
19. Extra learning sessions taught by Student Teachers
20. Online storytime
21. Develop home learning resources
22. Additional materials creation
23. Parent guides
24. Video guides
25. Online resources for children to explore
26. Small group teaching as required by MST in a separate MS Teams Channel or break-out room