



## Experiences of Teaching an Inclusive Class During the COVID-19 Pandemic Era: Conundrums in Student Teacher Education.

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### ABSTRACT

In Zimbabwe, the process of educating teachers is designed in such a way that trainee teachers undergo a specified episode of teaching practice. During this period, the trainee teacher spends time imparting knowledge, drawn from the curriculum, on the learners at school, as part of training. However, some inclusive schools in Zimbabwe are located in remote rural areas with little or no online teaching resources that trainee teachers can use for them to get the needed exposure to online teaching endeavours. Due to rapid changes in modern teaching ushered in by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, trainee teachers have been left confused and seem to use unorthodox means to get the desired experiences. This study explored COVID-19-induced teaching practice challenges experienced by trainee teachers in inclusive schools in Zimbabwe. A qualitative case study design was adopted and twenty (20) participants were purposively sampled from one university that trains teachers. A document analysis guide and semi-structured zoom interviews were used to solicit for data from the participants and the data were thematically analysed. It emerged that trainee teachers experienced major personal, mentor-related and online teaching methodology challenges. The study recommends provision of incentives to university trainee teachers for online teaching and that the teacher development departments in universities should avail more time for online micro teaching before teaching practice.

**Key Words:** Teaching practice, Trainee teachers, Inclusive teaching, Online teaching.

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching practice experiences are intended to mould perfection in relation to individuals` intra and interpersonal skills. The teaching practice episode which is

regarded as field experience or practice teaching or school-based experience and internship, as articulated by Rorrison (2008), is pivotal to inclusivity in education. Mattson, Eilertsen and Rorrison (2011) view



teaching practice as an educative experience which helps trainee teachers understand the central purpose of teaching. This means that teaching practice is an act of observing and doing, under the stewardship of knowledgeable others. It is a planned, supervised and evaluated course designed to give trainee teachers practice in the art of teaching (Loughran, 2006). Hudson (2012:13) says, “Teaching practice provides trainee teachers with education effectiveness and a clear understanding of the context of the school practices.” Teaching practice programmes vary in terms of context, policy, assessment, duration and scope (Mattson, Eilertsen & Rorrison, 2011). In Zimbabwe, at university level, it is a requirement that students undertake a practical component that includes a course of study in inclusive schools. Trainee teachers are, therefore, attached to mentors for a specified period, from whom they learn practical skills regarding the management of diverse learners in inclusive classes. It was, therefore, deemed important to find out their experiences and challenges during COVID-19 online teaching practice attachment.

Knowledge is dynamic and the role of trainee teachers has grown to include comprehensive assessment, consultation, collaborative planning and joint needs analysis of pupils’ learning needs (Saricoban, 2019). Teacher education programmes should, therefore, continue to produce teachers who would be responsive to the COVID-19 online diverse learning as well as cultural and socio-economic needs of all the learners, including those with disabilities. A research conducted by Tawodzera and Themare (2019) shows that

some trainee teachers are, to a large extent, willing to include learners with disabilities in online lessons. Hayes and Halpenny (2017) conducted a review of the literature on trainee teachers’ attitudes towards online teaching and concluded that most trainee teachers from universities were not willing to implement online lessons with inclusive classes with learners with disabilities. This means that trainee teachers may not be concerned with acquiring effective and appropriate teaching methodology, classroom management techniques and viable communication strategies for learners (Chan & Parr, 2012). The understanding is that trainee teachers require well-calibrated and systematic online guidance before teaching practice endeavours during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This would allow them to gain relevant and efficient teaching competencies for use in real school environments. The implication is that the teaching practice ought to be a continuous learning experience or an on-going exercise beyond teacher education. Teaching practice should, therefore, be regarded as an online lifelong learning experience aimed at utilising relevant contemporary practices applicable to various learners in inclusive settings. The attention towards teaching practice challenges experienced by trainee teachers is vital due to the COVID-19 pandemic complications and overlapping roles of the trainee teachers, mentors and university lecturers involved in it.

Trainee teachers require systematic online orientation since it initiates them to the teaching profession and bridges the gap between theory and practice. Teaching practice helps trainee teachers to apply



theoretical knowledge into practical experience (Merc, 2010; Werf, 2012). The message conveyed is that hands-on practice and meaningful practical experiences in online teaching illuminate the trainee teachers' orthopedagogics and didactics which guide them into meaningful online teaching and learning events that enable them to recognise the reality of learners' needs (Loughran, 2006; Rorrison, 2008). Teaching practice provides trainee teachers with opportunities to acquire necessary online skills and behaviours, hence inadequate online orientation can create challenges during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teaching in inclusive schools is multi-faceted since inclusive classes are made up of learners with diverse learning needs and modalities (Tonge, 2014). This means that learners with various educational needs are found in an inclusive class. Teaching practice affords trainee teachers the opportunity to understand modalities of teaching, such as understanding learner needs, pluralism or differences, environmental circumstances and situational factors (Hamaidi et al., 2014). Trainee teachers are expected to understand the ethos of the school community or environment. They should also be able to investigate workplace situational factors, school organisation and classroom practices (Patton & Beirn-Smith, 2014). Furthermore, trainee teachers are expected to know the curriculum content, curriculum differentiation, pedagogical and evaluation strategies for different learner attributes (Patton & Beirn-Smith, 2014; Tonge, 2014). This implies that trainee teachers should gain and demonstrate their practical expertise in online teaching

and professional growth and develop personal competencies in managing diverse online learners. It is a prerequisite that they should learn to formulate learning objectives, communicate with learners, use appropriate media, evaluate pupils' developmental progress, employ appropriate online teaching methods, and control pupils' behaviour. The anticipated outcome is that teaching practice should afford them the opportunity to gain confidence in teaching through practical experience for successful teaching in inclusive settings (Ntsaluba & Chireshe, 2013). The implication is that trainee teachers should be able to update and align online content to the curriculum so as to reflect evolving COVID-19 societal requirements as well as individual learning needs that have to be regarded as the necessary experience.

Trainee teacher induction denotes a collection of programmes involving orientation, support and guidance for beginning teachers (Ingersoil & Strong, 2011). This signifies that trainee teacher online induction is an imperative process in acculturating teachers to their new careers and helping them overcome the COVID-19-induced challenges in teaching. Induction programmes are deemed by Kearney (2014) to happen in three stages, which are orientation, establishment and development. The implication is that inductees may expect online orientation to the profession and/or organisation, personal and professional support and opportunities to develop their online knowledge, skills and attitudes that are essential for effective teaching. The quality and appropriateness of trainee teacher induction programmes vary from country to country. In the United States, for example,

trainee teachers' induction is a system-wide, coherent, comprehensive training and support process (Wong, 2004). This means that trainee teacher induction is regarded as a part of the lifelong online teaching professional development programme of new and trainee teachers' teaching and is aimed at improving their effectiveness in their professional standards during COVID-19. Trainee teacher induction in Switzerland begins in pre-service education and continues throughout teachers' careers (Howe, 2006). In Germany and France, trainee teacher induction is based on an apprentice-style system, where, the beginning teachers, who in Zimbabwe are regarded as trainee teachers, are categorised into the teaching profession by teaching and studying at the same time (Kearney, 2014). Observably, some teacher training institutions in Zimbabwe have shortcomings in meeting the online induction needs of the trainee teachers during such emergencies as the COVID-19 pandemic, hence, programmes may fail to meet recommended or preferred practices. Thus, this study articulates a myriad of unsanctioned COVID-19-induced challenges which trainee teachers encounter during their induction and teaching practice.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teaching practice by trainee teachers is a process dovetailed in Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Systems Approach. The theory rests on the assumption that a person's development is a joint product of four properties that include the person, context, process and time (Ehekal & Mahoney, 2017). The person factor refers to the individual's characteristics such as age, gender and

competency that interact with the environment to influence development. In this respect, trainee teachers' personal factors during the COVID-19 pandemic could affect their personality, which may, in turn, affect teaching practice outcomes directly or indirectly. On the other hand, the context factors, which include the micro, meso, exo and macro community systems, might have a bearing on the trainee teacher's inter and intra personal relationships. The process factors are a complex reciprocal exchange between an active, evolving human organism and its immediate external environment, termed proximal processes. The complexities of reciprocity and interaction with the environment engagement may have both desirable and undesirable consequences in the teaching practice experiences, hence, the proximal process occurs at a specific time and place within a specific historical context. Time is understood at various levels of the ecological systems. Micro-time refers to specific episodes of proximal processes (minute by minute), whereas, the meso-time captures the periodicity of proximal processes over long intervals (days or weeks) (Hayes & Halpenny, 2017). Time is conceptualised at the macro level as the chrono system and is concerned with anticipated outcomes for trainee teachers during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The achievements of quality education for all and reduced inequalities are enshrined in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 10, respectively. These rely on online teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Online

learning is a new dimension and recognized veracity in the education of all learners, including those with disabilities but most trainee teachers seem to have confusion in online teaching. Researches by Kearney (2014), Tonge (2014), and Hayes and Halpenny (2017) suggest that pre-service trainee teachers in inclusive schools are not capacitated to include children with disabilities in online academic activities, hence there was a need to find out the challenges they encountered in online teaching during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. The focus of the research was premised on the fact that trainee teachers were exposed to a conventional teaching practice programme but found themselves in a different context where they were expected to teach inclusive classes online.

## **OBJECTIVE**

The study sought to find out the COVID-19 pandemic online-induced teaching practice challenges experienced by trainee teachers in their endeavour to implement online teaching.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study sought to address the following research questions:

- What COVID-19-induced challenges do trainee teachers experience during teaching practice?
- Which knowledge do trainee teachers need to possess for online teaching practice in inclusive schools?
- How do school administrators support trainee teachers on online

teaching practice during COVID-19 era to alleviate challenges encountered?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative approach was adopted where a case study research design was employed. A case study design offers researchers the ability to gather data from actual participants within a short time and at a low cost (Denscombe, 2007; Yin, 2011). The case study design enabled the researchers to obtain pre-service trainee teachers' views on online teaching practice challenges and their suggested solutions to circumvent the COVID-19-induced challenges. In this study, the researchers purposively sampled 20 (ten female and ten male pre-service trainee teachers from one university according to sex, university department, nature and location of the school and the period one has been on online teaching practice attachment. Trainee teachers from the Teacher Development Department who were in rural inclusive schools whose classes had learners with disabilities were sampled. Purposive sampling as a non-probability sampling technique allowed the researchers to use semi-structured zoom interviews to generate data. This also enabled the researchers to generate data through participatory discussion among trainee teachers who were sampled. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of the participants who were judged to possess the best knowledge and most valuable information for the purpose. Semi-structured zoom interviews were administered to focus groups with 10 participants for more than an hour per session

and data were audio-recorded. Zoom focus group discussions enhanced the interaction between the participants and the researchers. Semi-structured interviews were consistent with this qualitative case study because they enabled interviewees to “speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings” as postulated by Berg (2007, p. 96). Hence, participants and the researchers managed to exchange experiences, concepts and opinions. The researchers also managed to solicit data through document analysis. Lesson plans and online activities were analysed, focusing on the period one would have been teaching online. Document analysis was a valuable technique that was used to explore online practices of the phenomenon in the natural setting. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that thematic content analysis enables identifying, emphasising, examining and reporting patterns or themes within data by describing a phenomenon. The thematic approach to data analysis enabled the presentation and analysis of emerging themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data are presented following the themes that arose from the research objectives. These include personal, pedagogical, logistical and mentor-related COVID-19-induced challenges. Participants’ responses are presented as vignettes.

### Personal Challenges

A number of personal-related challenges were highlighted and these emanated from trainee teachers’ online experiences during teaching practice. Most of

the trainee teachers failed to communicate with learners with hearing impairment through the use of sign language as the mentors were not physically available to do the interpretations for them. The following excerpt gives testimony:

*I had two learners who were deaf and had challenges in using sign language and had problems in utilising online for such learners. My mentor was no available for me because of the COVID-19 pandemic. No one could do the sign language interpretation for me. I was not conversant with sign language.*

The participants indicated various personal challenges in communication, dovetailed in the use of sign language to communicate online with the learners who were deaf. The implication is that, during training, the trainee teachers were exposed to a conventional teaching practice programme, where their mentors would interpret and teach them sign language but found themselves in a different context where they were expected to teach inclusive classes online due to the COVID-19 regulations. Merc (2010) explains personal challenges in communication as attitudes, behaviours, experiences and emotional factors that hinder an individual from sending and receiving information. The implication is that sign language skills are essential for any teacher in inclusive rural classes for communicating with learners with hearing problems. The findings above corroborate Lakhani’s (2014) assertion that sufficient awareness and information about sign language are essential to all teachers of inclusive classes in order for them to consider the communication needs of

students who are deaf and to manage their behaviour problems and learning needs.

In line with these research findings on the challenges of using sign language experienced by trainee teachers, Sahin (2008) highlights that communication barriers are evident where trainee teachers experience a cross-cultural teaching challenge whilst on practicum. This means that the ability to use sign language would promote trainee teachers' thinking and openness to cultural diversity, including Deaf culture. Trainee teachers who can communicate using sign language may develop a greater appreciation of Deaf culture and online teaching, including being able to connect it with the host community's culture, enabling him or her to have diversity in communication. Some trainee teachers experienced cultural disequilibrium (Taylor, 1994). This means online coping strategies from the affected trainee teachers are, therefore, called for, especially psychological adjustment in order to avoid COVID-19 communication-induced challenges in inclusive classes, especially due to incompetence in sign language.

Another research finding was lack of online braille transcription skills on the part of the trainee teachers. One of the participants had this to say:

*I had challenges in online braille transcription as one of my learners had blindness and could not transcribe braille, hence experienced challenges in managing his learning during online teaching.*

Under normal situations, the mentor would emboss and transcribe content that the trainee teachers would use for students who are

blind, but found themselves in a different context where they were expected to teach braille and use brailled content online, due to the COVID-19 regulations. The above sentiments imply that if trainee teachers cannot braille information or transcribe it, then they may not effectively teach students who are blind online, hence encounter challenges during such teaching in an inclusive class, where learners with blindness would be included. Brumstad (2007) and Arnett and Freeburg (2008) observe that in some cases, the professional competence of trainee teachers is deficient, with unsatisfactory online dictation, content mastery, weaknesses at practical teaching and not up to standard in technical proficiency. Trainee teachers may not be well-versed with issues like online braille transcription, sign language, or skills training, due to inadequate training and orientation done at the university due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides the braille embossing and transcription, most trainee teachers had problems with online management of learners who exhibited undesirable behaviours and those with other forms of disabilities. One of the trainee teachers had this to say:

*We lack requisite skills to manage some of the behaviours exhibited by the learners on online teaching. We did not receive adequate online orientation on managing learners who are diverse. We were not adequately prepared to teach them online as individuals.*

The sentiments in the above research findings from the participants show that trainee teachers lack requisite skills in online-

managing learners with disabilities, such as those who exhibited Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and who would seem to exhibit disruptive behaviours. It was very difficult for trainee teachers to maintain discipline in such learners in an online inclusive teaching set-up. This finding is in line with Mapfumo, Chitsiko and Chireshe's (2012) finding that trainee teachers experienced problems with children with disruptive behaviours or misbehaving learners and this created a lot of stress among them. The participants unanimously indicated lack of online management skills due to inadequate understanding of the learners' nature of disability during their teaching practice during the COVID-19 period. One of the participants openly confessed that:

*I did not have adequate information on how to manage students with special educational needs, especially those with advanced learning problems online.*

The above sentiment is consistent with Lakhan's (2014) observation that, due to lack of teacher awareness on disability issues and learners' special educational needs, most trainee teachers find it problematic to manage learners with various learning needs. The implication portrayed is that insufficient awareness and misinformation about disability issues can lead to challenges of online malpractice by trainee teachers, which can negatively affect the management and even the teaching and learning process of children with special needs, as well as create other general challenges for such trainee teachers in inclusive settings. The implication is that trainee teachers'

theoretical knowledge should guide them in understanding the online conditions and circumstances of their learners with disabilities and manage them effectively in online inclusive teaching, that is, if they would have received such knowledge at their training institutions.

Most of the participants indicated a multitude of problems in managing learners who displayed maladaptive behaviours online. The trainee teachers revealed that behaviour disorders specifically created online learner management problems during their teaching episodes. This finding is consistent with Tonge's (2014) observation that children with disabilities, especially those with severe to profound intellectual disabilities, have at least three times the level of serious emotional and behaviour problems than those typically in the so-called normal development. Although such behaviour problems are due to complex interaction of bio-psychosocial factors such as impaired brain function, cognitive deficits, social stress and rejection, most trainee teachers were afraid of giving them online activities as they did not have any orientation on the causes and management of their behaviours during online teaching. Most of the trainee teachers experienced various challenges linked to online teaching methodology that was to be applied for such learners due to the nature of such learners and logistical issues that were regarded as personal. The trainee teachers said that they experienced problems in online material development for learners with special educational needs.



### **Logistical Challenges**

Most of the trainee teachers articulated logistical challenges related to Individual Educational Plan (IEP) application. McLaughlin and Lewis (2000, p. 55) define an individualised education plan as a written educational document of activities developed for each student eligible for special education. This means that an IEP is a written and agreed explicit document to determine the programmes and services that should be provided to meet the specific educational needs of a learner with disabilities. The implication is that an IEP specifies what will be done, how it should be done, when it should be done and how one would know that it has been done. Given such demands of an IEP, most of the trainee teachers revealed that they had several COVID-19-induced challenges which were in line with how an IEP could be implemented, monitored and evaluated online so as to ensure and monitor the learner's progress. The analysed documents similarly showed that trainee teachers had limited knowledge of the IEP, especially on how to prepare, implement and evaluate it online. This was compounded by lack of understanding of appropriate online methods to use for the diverse learners in inclusive classes.

Lack of knowledge of an IEP is consistent with Brandt's (2011) assertion that the IEP is often not developed in a logical and coherent manner because of limited knowledge of probationary, unqualified or trainee teachers. The implication is that trainee teachers' lack of knowledge of an IEP leads to adoption of negative attitudes

towards learners who would need IEP in online learning. Most of the trainee teachers complained that they were not adequately prepared for the realities of online classroom management and teaching, especially on IEP. Rorrison (2008) argues that teaching practice learning should not be left to chance so as not to waste learning opportunities. This means that teaching practice should not be a time of tension, frustration, misinformation, confrontation, acquiescence and poor communication regarding practical aspects like IEPs, hence, learners with disabilities in inclusive online regular classes may be negatively labelled and may not socially and academically benefit from such arrangements during such emergencies as the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the trainee teachers experienced COVID-19-induced challenges, as most of them were not effectively oriented on online IEP usage. Furthermore, Leke-ateh, Assan and Debeila (2013) observe that trainee teachers are not adequately prepared for remote teaching practice. Merc (2010) also observes that insufficient online knowledge and careless participation, including inappropriate online individualised teaching are challenges. These were among the most frequently stated teaching practice problems experienced by trainee teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to findings of this study.

Quite a number of online logistical teaching practices experienced by trainee teachers were related to university and school factors. The following quotation gives testimony to the assertion:

*I was at a very distant school without viable internet or even electricity. I used my personal data bundles to try and have online lessons with my class.*

The revelation above shows that trainee teachers experienced a myriad of ICT challenges during teaching practice. The lack of viable internet and electricity at most schools was one of the major problems that affected the way they executed their online teaching practice. Rorrison (2018) found out that the ways the university prepares its students for online teaching practice, deploys and supervises them, were not effective in developing countries. This implies that the current practices in teacher development may be deemed not to be in tandem with 21<sup>st</sup> century online teaching dictates. The issue of lack of internet and electricity was said to be worse where trainee teachers were not offered teaching practice places in rural inclusive schools. Lack of such facilities for trainee teachers heavily affected their day-to-day school online activities. This finding is consistent with Malone's (2019) observation that trainee teachers need emotional, social support and a well electrified and internet connected practicum environment if they are to implement online teaching. The implication is that trainee teachers' internet facilities should be a priority to avoid risks of poor implementation of online teaching and maladjustment challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic teaching stint. In addition to lack of internet challenges, the findings of this study agree with Ntsaluba and Chireshe's (2013) assertion that lack of knowledge and involvement by host teachers in online planning and teaching create threatening and unfriendly teaching practice

environments, leading to negative feelings, lack of self-confidence and feelings of insecurity by trainee teachers in the implementation of online teaching. Hamaidi et al. (2014) note that once the host school administration is unaware of the trainee teachers' online teaching needs, it may not produce teachers who can implement online teaching.

Apart from online logistical challenges, trainee teachers revealed that they also faced financial constraints. The participants confirmed that they did not receive any form of teaching practice remuneration and were self-sponsoring online teaching. The finding resonates well with research findings by Mapfumo, Chitsiko and Chireshe (2012), which confirmed stressful financial challenges faced by university trainee teachers in Zimbabwe. The issue that university trainee teachers were not given any remuneration was also alluded to by Leke-ateh et al. (2013), who observes that trainee teachers are seen as relieving some of the teachers' workloads at no extra cost. It is, therefore, clear that trainee teachers see online teaching practice as an extra burden as they are not given any incentive, hence they developed negative attitudes towards online teaching practice during the COVID-19 pandemic episode and they were also accustomed to face-to-face teaching.

### **Online-mentoring-related Challenges During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The trainee teachers revealed that they suffered mentor-related challenges which included limited online mentor supervision and unavailability of mentors in

some online lessons. One of the participants had this to say:

*Online mentorship was not as per my expectation. It was too limited and manifested with a lot of other duties to attend to other than teaching.*

The above sentiment shows that trainee teachers experienced limited online mentorship and sometimes unavailability mentors, resulting in zero, limited or delayed supervision by such mentors, leading to poor quality of online teaching practice. Some of the trainee teachers were allocated their own online classes to teach, especially those from the secondary school level. The following sentiments attest to this:

*I was allocated a class of my own, because the school was under-staffed and at first, I did not know what to do with that online class. I felt embarrassed. At one point I was assisted by the visiting volunteer.*

The implication that can be derived is that some trainee teachers did not even have mentors to assess or supervise their online teaching, some of them were attached to the school head or deputy head who, by the nature of their administrative duties, did not give the needed online mentorship to the trainee teachers, thereby creating under-supervision. Apart from that, most of the participants revealed that some mentors were unavailable to give advice on proper online teaching strategies. The research finding that there was limited online mentor supervision among some trainee teachers is consistent with Hamaidi et al.'s (2014) finding, that some student teachers were not provided with adequate support by senior teachers due to

overload of work on the part of mentors. This means that most senior teachers seem not to be well-versed with their online mentoring responsibilities to trainee teachers. They seem to lack training on their online role as mentors, hence can under-supervise trainee teachers. In addition, Ziechner (2010) asserts that school-based mentors can portray negative attitudes towards supervising trainee teachers as they view mentoring trainee teachers as an unnecessary workload. This implies that some mentors may not welcome trainee teachers in their online classes. They may find it as an unnecessary extra workload on their part. Rorrison (2008) asserts that school-based mentor training, profession-sensitisation on mentorship and mentoring workshops are vital to effectively aid school-based mentors in supervising trainee teachers in order to reduce inadequate mentoring.

The research finding that some mentors were unavailable to assist in online teaching is consistent with Leke-ateh, Assan and Debeila's (2013, p. 284) research finding that, "mentors can ignore or abandon student teachers to themselves whilst on teaching practice." This may be because some school-based mentors have several additional responsibilities which affect their online mentoring services, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The mentor could be away from the online teaching learning environment, or committed with other duties, thereby rendering inadequate mentoring services. Such mentors can fail to constantly guide trainee teachers in their practical teaching and professional development. Ali (2011) opines that some mentors are unaware of their roles during online teaching practice,

thus, the current skills, experience and knowledge mentors have are not sufficient to provide the much-needed and expected online support for the mentee in teaching practice implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Online Pedagogical COVID-19-Induced Challenges

Most of the participants revealed that they experienced online COVID-19-induced teaching methodological challenges during teaching practice. A lot of such challenges were mentioned by participants during zoom focus group discussions. One of the responses given below reinforces this point thus:

*We had problems in modifying online curriculum content to suit learners who had problems with reading and mathematics problems. We were overwhelmed by online practicum duties, eish, they were too much. We were expected to teach, maintain records, do action research, plan and evaluate online daily, it was too much.*

Taking note of the above sentiments, the choice of the online teaching method was a challenge that trainee teachers encountered during COVID-19 era teaching practice. This was compounded by challenges on how to modify the curriculum content online to cater for those learners with various learning disabilities, managing pupils' behaviour, preparing, using and evaluating IEPs, and adopting appropriate online methods for specific learning disabilities. Most of the trainee teachers revealed that they experienced challenges in online modification of curriculum content to suit

diverse learners in inclusive online classes. The findings are in line with Crookes (2003), who found out that approaches for conceptualising curriculum content for learners in inclusive settings have moved from a developmental model in the 1970s, through a functional model in the 1980s, to the contemporary model of embracing ways of enabling learners to participate virtually in the general education curriculum. This means that trainee teachers may lack knowledge and skills in adopting suitable online teaching methods and modifying curriculum in line with the nature of learners' needs and interest, thereby resorting to a one-size-fits-all approach to online teaching. However, Chien (2013) posits that selecting appropriate methods in teaching, using viable strategies and adopting a positive attitude towards learners with special needs, can be met with challenges by some trainee teachers. Trainee teachers were not abreast with changes in online curriculum modification issues and embracing contemporary views during teaching, hence they encountered COVID-19 pandemic-induced challenges during their teaching practice.

### CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that trainee teachers encounter a myriad of COVID-19 pandemic-induced challenges that are categorised as online personal, pedagogical, logistical and mentor-related. The challenges emanate from lack of online support from training institutions and school management due to inadequate understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic conditions which the trainee teachers experience during teaching practice. Most of the trainee teachers

encounter problems in using online sign language for communication with learners with hearing problems, those learners with learning disabilities, learners with behaviour problems and with visual impairment whom they find in regular online classes.

The researchers conclude that insufficient awareness and misinformation about online teaching and learning issues lead to challenges of malpractices by trainee teachers, which negatively affect social, the emotional and academic development of learners with special educational needs as well as create challenges for such trainee teachers who adopted online inclusive teaching. This can be traced back to lack of knowledge on online teaching methods that can be used to cater for the academic needs and interests of learners with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is exacerbated by lack of knowledge on the utility of online teaching which they could not easily develop in a logical and coherent manner. It was also noted that trainee teachers on teaching practice encounter internet and electricity problems which are compounded by financial challenges. This study also concluded that trainee teachers encounter limited online mentor supervision as some mentors do not supervise their trainee teachers. Lastly, it was also concluded that lack of online mentoring is due to the COVID-19 pandemic induced challenges in curriculum adaptation and the utility of IEPs due to lack of pre-requisite knowledge and skills on contemporary online dictates.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Basing upon the conclusions, the researchers recommend that the government should put in place human and material resources for online teaching practice, like allowances or incentives to afford trainee teachers conducive online teaching environments. The university's Department of Teacher Development should provide online teaching practice orientation with clear procedures, specific requirements and trainee teachers' expectations, roles and responsibilities through workshops and online training sessions through micro- or peer teaching. It is also recommended that the disability module should be taught in two phases, that is, before and after teaching practice, so that the students will be in tandem with 21<sup>st</sup> century online dictates of early inclusivity and diversity in education. Mentors and academic supervisors should be trained to help trainee teachers gain more knowledge and experience on online managing classroom environments of learners with different learning needs and who require different online learning modalities. The university teaching practice coordinators should aim to develop the knowledge, skills and competence of trainee teachers in sign language, braille and IEPs, among many other practical requirements well before their online teaching practice. The Department of Teacher Development should evaluate the current teaching practice procedures in terms of online planning, collaboration, training, orientation and classroom management and teaching competencies.

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