FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF VIRTUAL FIELD EXPERIENCE PLACEMENT IN A TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM IN THE UAE

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The purpose of this study was to examine faculty perceptions of virtual field placement of preservice teachers at a university in the United Arab Emirates and to explore the factors that promote or hinder the success of this experience. Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding was used as the theoretical framework of this study and to explain the faculty's engagement with the field placement experience.
Background	The global pandemic of COVID-19 has affected the provision of teacher education programs around the world. It forced many universities to implement emergency remote teaching strategies including virtual field experiences.
Methodology	Considering the novelty of this phenomenon, an exploratory qualitative research design was followed to arrive at an in-depth description of the faculty's perceptions. A convenience sampling, which is characterized by the deliberate targeting of information-rich participants, was used to select five faculty members who supervised 40 Emirati preservice teachers during their virtual field experience. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.
Contribution	The framework put forth in this study could serve as a guideline for teacher education programs, especially field experience preparation.

Findings	It was found that faculty had different perceptions of virtual field experiences. Although preservice teachers were faced with unprecedented virtual field experiences, collaboration with different stakeholders helped them achieve the learning outcomes. A main drawback of the virtual field experience, however, impacted preservice Emirati teachers' motivation about online teaching.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Preservice teachers' technological skills should be reinforced and built to enable purposeful and practical technological integration in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, a holistic inclusion of all stakeholders' approach is needed to upskill and develop the competencies of all parties involved in the process taking into consideration a more enriching collaborative manner. Such a redesign should be examined to assess its validity and efficiency on a wider and more diverse sample to ensure its reliability and success.
Recommendations for Researchers	Researchers are recommended to explore the impact of virtual field experience on young children learning and engagement by including all stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning process, especially young students' parents since findings showed that children under the age of eight are at a disadvantage in online learning.
Impact on Society	Implications of the findings of this study show that sustainable virtual field experiences can be attained through a collaborative approach. Collaboration is essential as it enables preservice teachers to succeed in implementing inclusive pedagogical approaches.
Future Research	Further studies can enrich the findings of this paper by expanding the collected data to provide deeper and more generalizable results. For example, virtual student teachers' and school students' scores should be collected and compared to face-to-face scores in order to assess and evaluate the learning itself.
Keywords	preservice teachers, virtual field experience, technology integration, collaborative learning, teacher preparation program

INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic, COVID-19, has presented significant challenges in the education sector. The pandemic forced many learning institutions to close as a preventative measure to reduce the spread of the virus. Despite this closure, learning did not stop in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as schools and universities implemented emergency remote teaching strategies very fast. The transition from face-to-face classes to online learning was not a big issue in ordinary theory modules. The challenge was with practical subjects, for example, field experience, which is completed by preservice teachers with learners in schools. Moyo (2020) postulates that one of the greatest challenges faced by teacher training institutions across the globe was related to the handling of practicum modules since preservice teachers were used to completing them in physical classrooms. Because schools switched to online learning, preservice teachers had no choice but to complete their field experiences virtually.

There was no other way for preservice teachers to do their practicum module without being involved in the teaching experience as it is the initial and most influential opportunity that will cultivate the development of their teaching practices (Cohen et al., 2013; La Paro et al., 2014; Rock et al., 2012). During field experience, teachers practice and evaluate the knowledge they have built through their formal years of education. However, the unprecedented pandemic forced schools to shift to online learning and, as a result, the field placement needed to shift to an online or virtual mode. Recent literature (i.e., Ersin et al., 2020; Varela & Desiderio, 2020) indicated the need for teacher preparation programs to prepare preservice teachers with new skills and strategies that would equip them for online teaching in virtual field placements. For instance, the virtual field placement demands for preservice teachers to have digital knowledge

and literacy, online classroom management skills, online assessments, and evaluations of students' academic needs without being able to see them or interact with them (Varela & Desiderio, 2020).

There exists ample literature that focuses on preservice teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of virtual field experiences during the time of COVID-19 (Ersin et al., 2020; Hojeij & Baroudi, 2021; Mardiana, 2020). These include preservice teachers' experiences of virtual field experience (Hojeij & Baroudi, 2021), attitudes (Mardiana, 2020), and competencies (Ersin et al., 2020). However, there is a dearth of scholarship on the effects of field experience on preservice teachers (Soong et al., 2020) and faculty perceptions of virtual field placement experience in teacher education programs. A lack of knowledge in faculty perceptions is worth examining as they help improve the state of remote teaching and learning in general and virtual field experiences in particular as their thoughts (faculty) impact preservice teachers' performance (Şerife & Gökdaş, 2021). Considering the novelty of the phenomenon of virtual field placement, it becomes significant to explore faculty's perceptions as these perceptions influence their role and the support they provide to prepare their students (preservice teachers) and help them overcome challenges they might face (Hojeij et al., 2021). To this end, the study aims to answer these research questions:

1. What are the factors that influence faculty's perceptions of virtual field experience placement?
2. To what extent does the collaboration between key stakeholders impact the success of the virtual field placement?
3. How can teacher education programs improve virtual field placement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

VIRTUAL FIELD EXPERIENCE

Whether field experience is completed virtually or face-to-face, it remains the most indispensable element for preservice teachers' training. The field experience engenders professional transformation, reflection, and growth among preservice teachers (Moyo, 2020). Smith and Lev-Ari (2005) concur that field experience is a valuable component of teacher training as it prepares them to handle classroom realities (Grudnoff, 2011) and enables preservice teachers to link theory with practice in an authentic classroom setting (Ersin et al., 2020). Although COVID-19 compelled educational institutions to carry out field experience virtually in many different countries, it provided preservice teachers with the opportunity to practice teaching and it boosted their digital literacy (Ersin et al., 2020; Hojeij & Baroudi, 2021). This is why Şerife and Gökdaş (2021) recommended that all preservice teachers should be afforded an opportunity to do virtual field experience at least once in their study program. This prepares them to be able to teach effectively and to provide adequate support to all children in a physical classroom and online. Hixon and So (2009) contended that when preservice teachers participate in traditional face-to-face field experience, their opportunities are limited to what happens in a single classroom with one mentor school teacher. This is different from virtual field experience, which enables preservice teachers to be exposed potentially to different teaching environments and strategies. Therefore, it is important for preservice teachers to be exposed to teaching in a physical classroom as well as online as this is a needed contemporary skill set in education (Cahapay, 2020).

Such skills are needed not only during the time of COVID-19 but also beyond the global pandemic. The five essential benefits of using technology in field experience projected a decade ago, are detected in the current situation where practicum is conducted online. These benefits are: (a) exposure to various teaching/learning environments, (b) creation of shared experiences, (c) promoting reflectivity, (d) preparing students cognitively, and (e) learning about technology integration (Hixon & So, 2009, p. 296). When the global pandemic of COVID-19 is over, teaching and learning are less likely to return to the way it was before, as articulated by the International Commission on the Futures of Education (2020, p. 3) "We cannot return to the world as it was before." This has implications in the education sector as schools may implement online teaching modalities, which means offering virtual field experiences for preservice teachers. Cahapay (2020) postulates that the education sector is likely to adopt online learning strategies when the current pandemic is over. Sintema (2020) concurs that in the Zambian context, digitized virtual

classrooms are likely to occur, which makes the need for a virtual field experience indispensable. This is so, because "many schools are headed towards complete online modality or blended learning modality in instruction" (Cahapay, 2020, p. 3) after COVID-19.

FIELD EXPERIENCE IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Özüdoğru (2021) argues that one of the challenges faced by Turkish students during remote learning is that they could not do practice-based courses (such as practicum teaching) effectively as they used to do prior to COVID-19. Preservice teachers were reported to have faced pedagogical, technological, and social-emotional related challenges that made it hard for them to complete their field experiences (Özüdoğru, 2021). Students found it difficult to function in online classes independently, which affected lesson time allocation and efficiency (Evagorou & Nisiforou, 2020). This is different from what Ersin et al. (2020) reported, that in Turkey, online field placement was successful as preservice teachers were able to teach effectively and overcome technical problems.

Flores and Gago (2020) contended that, in Portugal, initial teacher education was faced with a challenge for preservice teachers to complete virtual field experience. Preservice teachers had different experiences with field placement. They did not find the switch from the physical classroom to the online experience easy. As a result, preservice teachers in Portugal who did virtual field experiences encountered some constraints that included the lack of internet access or lack of equipment, as well as a deficit in terms of digital literacy. In some cases, pupils did not possess the required equipment either because they did not have a laptop or a tablet; consequently, they had to share the same equipment with other family members. In other cases, there was no internet access or there were technical problems. In addition, some pupils found it difficult to navigate the online platforms to communicate and to find the tasks requiring a solution (Flores & Gago, 2020, p. 6).

Virtual field experiences are dependent on the availability of infrastructures such as the internet and electronic devices. In the Zimbabwean context, Moyo (2020) states that field experience could not occur at all as the country did not have any infrastructure that enables virtual field experience to take place. If the country does not have a system enabling school children to do online learning, there will be no way for preservice teachers to carry out the field experience. Şerife and Gökdaş (2021) reported that preservice teachers who participated in their study claimed that if they had a choice, they would opt for face-to-face field experience over the virtual one. The majority of the preservice teachers who preferred a face-to-face experience chose it because of the physical interaction that happens between the teacher and learners and amongst the learners themselves. This is similar to a study conducted in Australia where teachers had concerns about students' engagement online (Cruickshank et al., 2021). Engaging students online presents difficulties, but they are surmountable; if the person is adequately skilled, it can be achieved. Draves (2013) argues that students' engagement in online learning is pivotal and that it leads to meaningful learning and the achievement of educational goals. Students' interaction in online learning requires a social cognitive presence, and a teacher's presence to be established, resulting in the creation of an online learning community (Garrison et al., 2001).

FACULTY'S PERCEPTIONS OF FIELD PLACEMENTS

While worldwide literature focuses on measuring the perceptions, attitudes, and skills of preservice teachers in their field placements (i.e. Evagorou & Nisiforou, 2020; Luo et al., 2017), exploring faculty's perceptions is as equally important as these influence the quality of coaching and supervision offered. In the field placement, the faculty's role is more of a mentor who scaffolds the learning experience of preservice teachers. As such, the theoretical framework of this study is based on Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding that entails a more knowledgeable or skilled individual (the faculty) supporting a lower-skilled individual (the preservice teacher) to achieve the targeted goals (practice teaching). The concept of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development generate from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. The zone of proximal development is described as the distance between what learners can do themselves and

what they can achieve with the help of others. Therefore, scaffolding stimulates learners to learn, perform, and solve complex tasks that they cannot do on their own (Chen & Law, 2016).

In the context of this study, scaffolding happens when faculty interacts, discusses, and collaborates with preservice teachers to increase their performance and help them solve complex problems and challenges. The faculty acts as a mentor guide and supports preservice teachers with the implantation of teaching methodologies in real classrooms. Faculty ensures that preservice teachers are designing engaging lesson plans and assessments that are aligned with the learning outcomes. They model effective teaching techniques and monitor preservice teachers' performance and competencies (Clark et al., 2015). That being said, the perceptions and attitudes of faculty towards the field placement experience are highly connected with the quality of scaffolding and supervision offered and impact the overall field placement experience. This finding is evident in a recent study conducted in the UAE where eleven faculty supervisors revealed the factors in field placement that can directly impact their attitudes (Hojeij et al., 2021). Having a well-structured field placement program where the roles of preservice teachers, school mentors, and faculty supervisors are identified and agreed upon from one side and increasing the communication channels and collaboration between faculty, the school mentors and preservice teachers from the other side are among the factors that impact faculty's attitudes and enhance their experience (Boholano, 2017; Hojeij et al., 2021). Luo et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of building strong relationships and channels of collaboration between main key stakeholders for a positive online teaching experience for preservice teachers. This result had a greater impact on preservice teachers' perceptions of online teaching as they began to feel that online education could be equivalent to traditional education (Luo et al., 2017, p. 1). On the other hand, teaching young children online posed many challenges for preservice teachers and faculty as children learn best using hands-on activities and play, which are hard to attain in online learning (Kim, 2020). About 80% of the teachers reported that it was not easy to teach and engage with young children online (Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020). A survey conducted with more than 3,275 parents in the Chinese context found that the majority preferred face-to-face instruction when teaching young children (Dong et al., 2020).

Earlier studies like Boholano (2017) and Zeichner (2010) stressed the need for field placement programs to be well coordinated and structured so faculty can succeed in preparing preservice teachers to overcome the various challenges of teaching practices. It is also suggested that universities establish a system of rewards and recognitions for faculty to encourage them for conducting action research to solve contextual problems and advance the quality of field placement programs (Zeichner, 2010). Enhancing faculty's attitudes about the impact of the field placement on preservice teaching practices is also a catalyst to improve the quality of this experience. However, little is known about faculty's attitudes and perceptions (Cuenca, 2010), in particular with the sudden shift of these programs from face-to-face to online. Therefore, more research is needed to provide evidence about the impact of field placement programs and learn from the lessons that faculty faced during the virtual field placement that took place during the pandemic. A qualitative approach is adopted to capture faculty's perceptions in order to understand their experiences during this phenomenon and obtain a precise and overall picture of reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

Online field experience was implemented for the first time in the Early Childhood Education Program in the context of the study due to the unprecedented pandemic. Considering the novelty of this phenomenon, an exploratory qualitative research design was followed to arrive at an in-depth description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) of the faculty's perceptions. This approach helped the researchers follow an inductive investigative strategy through qualitative means to search for meaning and understanding of the phenomenon from the participants' views. The advantage of the phenomenological approach is that it focuses on the lived experiences of the subjects and their interpretations in order to depict the essence of the

phenomenon. Hence, the role of the researchers in the phenomenological approach was to analyze and compare these interpretations in order to draw comparisons and gain insights about the phenomenon and comprehend its essence.

PARTICIPANTS

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggested that studying a small number of subjects would help the researchers gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and enrich the findings of the study. This convenience sampling assisted the researchers in capturing the essence of the subjects' experiences and in discerning shared patterns and developing themes (Creswell, 2009). The sample in this study consisted of five faculty members in the College of Education at one university in the UAE. All participants had more than five years experience teaching and supervising students in higher education, they all had PhDs, and all were responsible for conducting virtual field experiences.

The faculty members experienced the supervision of preservice teachers in an online field placement for the first time in the period of one full semester during their teacher preparation program. Preservice teachers are undergraduate Emirati students in an Early Childhood Education Teacher (ECE) preparation program. This program entails that preservice teachers undertake four field experience placements throughout their 8-semester course of study at a partner school. This study is conducted during the eighth semester, where preservice teachers were required to spend ten nonconsecutive online teaching days at an elementary school where they were each paired with a school teacher mentor, who is the classroom teacher. The role of the mentor teacher was to assign the lessons to preservice teachers, observe them in action, and give constructive feedback about their teaching. During the virtual field placement, preservice teachers joined the online classes using Microsoft Teams. Most of them were prepared to use this platform one week before they started teaching. Each faculty was assigned eight preservice teachers. The role of the faculty was to guide them during their online field experience and ensure that they met the course requirements. Additionally, the faculty members were expected to liaise with the mentor teachers and scaffold the work of the preservice teachers to enhance their virtual field experience. All of this was done online due to the COVID-19 quarantine.

DATA COLLECTION

Interviewing is the best technique to use when conducting a phenomenological study of a few selected individuals because it helps participants share their experiences and reflect on themselves (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted on Zoom with the participants and each interview lasted for about 30 to 45 minutes. The use and confidentiality of data and anonymity of the participants' personal information were guaranteed before the start of the interview. The identity of participants was protected by allocating numbers (from 1 to 5) as pseudonyms. Verbal consent to video-record the interview on Zoom was obtained. It was important that participants have their cameras open during the interview in order for the researchers not to miss any visual cues from the participants and allow the researcher to take notes of their facial expressions to capture indications of their emotions. Additionally, the participants were assured that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the interview at any time.

The interview questions were developed to serve the purpose of the study and generate themes to construct an overall understanding of the faculty's experience during the online field placement of preservice teachers. As such, the first question aimed at understanding the highlights and the challenges of the virtual field placement as experienced by the faculty members. The second question was to collect participants' views about the benefits and challenges that preservice teachers faced during online field placement. The third question aimed at understanding how preservice teachers used technology in online instruction to stimulate students' learning and engagement. The fourth question was about the online classroom management skills of preservice teachers. The fifth question was designated to seek further recommendations from the faculty's point of view to improve the virtual field experience. Follow-up or probe

questions (i.e.: What do you mean? Tell me more about that. Give me more about that. And so on.) were also asked to seek more information or clarity about the participants' answers.

DATA ANALYSIS

An inductive data analysis was followed to identify units of data from interview transcriptions. The researchers manually analyzed the data and worked reiteratively between these units of data by assigning codes to each input using an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Then these codes were color-coded. Assigned codes were based on the participant's response to the specific question asked (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After that, the researchers compared the units of data and organized them into tentative categories or themes in order to capture some recurring patterns that cut across the data and then systematically compared and grouped these categories (Creswell, 2009). As this data analysis process continued, the researchers moved from an inductive to a deductive stance to determine a final set of four categories that remained solid throughout the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Table 1 shows these categories and sub-categories.

Table 1. Categories and sub-categories

CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES
Enhanced collaborative learning	Collaborating with school mentor teachers. Developing relationships with school mentor teachers. Collaboration between faculty members, school principals, and co-ordinators. Sharing information. Using various available digital communication tools
Building relationship with school mentor teachers	Lessened faculty's stress level. Provided faculty with feedback about preservice teachers. Increased preservice teachers' commitment and motivation levels.
Drawbacks of virtual field experience	Lack of classroom teacher-student and student-student interaction in online learning. Difficulties for preservice teachers to manage students' learning and behavior in an online classroom. Preservice teachers' inability to differentiate the instruction as per students' needs. Classroom students' disengagement and motivation. Not taking virtual field experience seriously by preservice teachers. Reduced preservice teachers' responsibility.
Recommendations for improvement	Training or professional development sessions on the use of technology for faculty. Recruiting dedicated school mentor teachers. Providing technological professional development for preservice teachers before the field experience. Strengthening relationships among faculty.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study categorized according to emerging major themes: enhanced collaborative learning, building relationships with school mentor teachers, drawbacks of virtual field experience, and recommendations for improvement.

The majority of the faculty member participants in this study perceived that the preservice teachers had a positive virtual field experience. Preservice teachers felt that the field experience opened new horizons and gave them opportunities to put the skills they learned in their teacher preparation course into

practice. This new experience exposed preservice teachers to technology and trained them on selecting and integrating technology into their online instruction. The following excerpts from Participants #2 and #5 respectively support this view:

> Preservice teachers were exposed to a very new experience, but it opened new horizons for them because in the educational field, we are always going to have online learning as an element within probably a hybrid or blended learning model.

> Having the experience to immerse in such a model during their internship experience, I would say it was a valuable learning experience.

Preservice teachers had an opportunity to use the knowledge and the skills they developed in their course work just like in a real-life situation. They had the opportunity to practice what they learned at the university in a technology course; for them, it was putting theory into practice. Learning was taking place during a virtual field experience. There was much reflection as preservice teachers would have the opportunity to watch their recorded lessons and reflect. This was confirmed by Participant #1:

> Another advantage [of virtual field experience] is that their observations were recorded, and I was able to observe them, but the preservice teachers were also able to observe the recordings and reflect on their teaching which would not have happened previously under normal circumstances.

ENHANCED COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

One of the recurring positive aspects of the virtual field experience successes among participants was collaboration. In face-to-face classes, school mentor teachers had challenges meeting with faculty members to discuss preservice teachers' performance, but through virtual field experience, the level of collaboration between faculty members and school mentor teachers was enhanced due to the development of relationships and information sharing through the use of technology (i.e., WhatsApp). Participant #3 reported, "I had an open communication with the school mentor teacher and I felt that my relationship with her developed.". Collaboration during virtual field experience was not only limited to faculty and school mentor teachers. There was also an efficient and effective collaboration between faculty members, school principals, and coordinators where they used WhatsApp to create a group and communicate about any challenges faced and helped each other solve them. Participant #3 explained:

> I managed to establish very good communication with over five principals and coordinators. We exchanged information without any delay in the first two weeks. What helped us do that is the WhatsApp group that we created and it made our job easier as we provided immediate help to preservice teachers.

This collaboration and information sharing was facilitated by the availability of various digital communication tools as explained by Participant #1:

> There was an opportunity to collaborate with the school mentor teachers in more flexible ways. Sometimes the school mentor teachers would say, "You know I don't have time, or I have got a meeting, or I have to be here or have to be there," so catching up with them and having time to spend with them when it was face-to-face was a big challenge. But virtually, it is like, "Oh let's get on [Microsoft] teams, or you know I am free at this time, let us connect also through WhatsApp." We are using a lot of technology and are becoming more innovative. I think that is something that has come as a result from having the experience online.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH SCHOOL MENTOR TEACHERS

The impact of the mentor-preservice-teacher relationship on the virtual field experience was noticeable in the participants' responses. Having a positive working relationship between school mentor teachers and preservice teachers and developing a collegial relationship between them reduced preservice teachers' stress levels making this new experience smooth. Participant #4 mentioned:

100% of preservice teachers had a really nice, decent relationship with their school mentor teachers. From the start they collaborated, they knew the rules, and they started building the relationship in a nice, positive, and progressive way. They just adapted very well with the school mentor teachers, they understood what they were supposed to do, and they started applying it.

Participant #5 reported that he gained a lot of insight into preservice teachers through a collaborative approach he was using. The approach involved collaboration with his students (the preservice teachers) on a one-on-one basis and working closely with school mentor teachers. This participant reported on the nature of the collaboration he had online, saying:

I set up on days that they [preservice teachers] were not working with their school mentor teachers. I scheduled one-on-one sessions with my entire class, and I had a series of questions that I asked them about how their experiences were going, what they were doing, and so on. So, that gave me a lot of insight into what was happening with each one of the preservice teachers, and I also reached out to school mentor teachers and asked them to give me updates in writing on what was happening with them. So, I was able to use the school mentor teacher's feedback in my one-on-one sessions.

Furthermore, it was notable that the collaborative relationship established among faculty members, school mentor teachers, and preservice teachers helped them become more committed and motivated. According to Participant #2:

I had mentors who were fully committed and motivated to providing the preservice teacher with the best mentor-mentee experience they could have, and for me that just made my job easier. So, I thought that was positive, and it also provided the preservice teachers with a good mentor relationship and experience, I believe, because there was a balance between encouraging them and also pushing them and holding them accountable. I really had a lot of confidence in the school mentor teachers.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED DURING VIRTUAL FIELD EXPERIENCE

Despite the fact that faculty members perceived that the virtual field experience was successful as the stated learning goals were achieved, they acknowledged the presence of some challenges. The first challenge emerged from the lack of interaction which resulted in preservice teachers preferring face-to-face teaching over online. Lack of interaction in online learning was noted as the greatest challenge which made preservice teachers' virtual field experiences difficult. Participant #2 said, "The preservice teachers missed a lot as they were not able to actually interact with each and every learner in a class. We cannot underestimate the value of face-to-face interaction with young children."

This challenge imposed more limitations, particularly on classroom management, young children's engagement, and differentiation of instruction. Faculty reported that it was very difficult for preservice teachers to involve young children in their online classes and increase their engagement. That is why they preferred face-to-face instruction after the global pandemic. Another participant reported that it would be better to implement blended learning so that preservice teachers get a chance to engage learners in face-to-face classes and also teach online. Participant #4 said:

If there were other possibilities, for example an opportunity for preservice teachers to have some blended face-to-face teaching with young children maybe once per week and then alternate the following week. It would be great for them as they would be able to have the best of both worlds. They would be able to have that face-to-face interaction, they would get to see those learners, and they would get to call them to order. They would get to do things like small group instruction, which they have not been able to do well. With the current structure, it is not possible.

Furthermore, faculty members reported that not all preservice teachers were motivated and ready to do their field experience virtually. This was the first virtual field experience when the pandemic started and

as a result, preservice teachers had a lot to deal with, including stress caused by the pandemic and the need to adapt to doing field experience virtually. All faculty members reported some challenges which were mainly related to the lack of preservice teachers' motivation which negatively impacted their abilities to take responsibility for their learning. Participant #1 said:

> The main challenges had to do with the preservice teachers that were unmotivated. They did not take this seriously. I had one situation with a preservice teacher who complained about the school mentor teacher. But, when I met the mentor and had an actual phone conversation with her, the mentor said, 'No, I'm just holding the preservice teacher accountable because she is missing out and coming in late. She is not doing what I'm asking her to do and didn't do the mini lesson. So, the preservice teacher started to talk about wanting to switch mentors and that was a challenge."

Similarly, Participant #5 echoed the same sentiment about some preservice teachers not taking the virtual field experience seriously by saying, "I found it difficult to get the girls to come to zoom meetings. I would hold meetings and only three of them would come … I just felt that the level of professionalism experienced wasn't great." Preservice teachers' failure to hold themselves accountable for their learning resonated with the idea of getting them to develop a growth mindset and this was reported as a challenge by Participant #2:

> I think the biggest challenge was getting preservice teachers to have a growth mindset. You know about the whole shift. At first, it was a bit of a challenge. Preservice teachers were asking about how this was going to work. How am I supposed to teach if I can't see the students? And so I think just trying to get them to a place of comfort and ease by telling them that we don't need to get stuck, let's progress, and let's think of ways that we are going to get through and we can manage as opposed to what we can't do. Let's talk about what we can do.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING VIRTUAL FIELD EXPERIENCE

Participants recommended that in order to improve the virtual field experience, there is a need for some training or professional development sessions held with all stakeholders. Participant #4 said:

> School mentor teachers and preservice teachers should be trained at the beginning of field placement on the use of the technology. I think they should have one week in advance of communicating with school mentor teachers before going to classes and start delivering instructions. This would really be helpful for all parties.

Another participant reflected on the importance of recruiting dedicated school mentor teachers and training them along with their school administrators. Participant #2 said:

> Sourcing schools that are of a good quality of teachers and administration is important. I do not think that every mentor needs to be experienced, I think that every mentor needs to be willing to learn, needs to be consistent and understands what's expected. I think that he/ she should go to mentor training. I think that administrators need to be part of the training as well. Whatever orientation we give to the administration, it needs to be part of the training so that administrators are spoken to directly. Here is what we need from you, and here is what we need from the mentors.

Participant #1 reiterated the need to emphasize training or coaching preservice teachers before they go out to do virtual field experiences. He stated:

> We need to provide online professional development for preservice teachers before going to the field, just to check with them, to make sure they have got the necessary skills and they know how to do it…You are surprised that they need some help with very small stuff. For example, small tips to do things right, going to build up an online activity, making proper power point presentation with correct font size, color, background, and how to make the presentation attractive.

If different professional development sessions are conducted with faculty members, school mentor teachers, and preservice teachers prior to the commencement of field experiences, that will help reduce some obstacles. Participant #5 reported that different faculty members were not giving preservice teachers the same information:

> The instructors need to work more closely together. I feel different instructors are giving the preservice teachers different information, and I feel it will be nicer if we chunk it up and have all the preservice teachers together in one class with all the instructors. The instructors would plan what they want to do with their preservice teachers, so we are all on the same page because it was just a weird experience. So, I think working together would eliminate confusion and I think that the instructions were too many, the handbook, and this form and then do that on task stream and do that on Blackboard.

DISCUSSION

Collaboration that was perceived during the virtual field experience in this study is essential as it is one of the four critical skills of the 21st century. The other three are communication, critical thinking, and creativity. Boholano (2017) argues that collaboration is one of the three essential critical skills that is needed by all students in order to stay competitive in a fast-changing job market. The start of COVID-19, which has brought unprecedented changes in education, has made the job market change faster where preservice teachers had to complete field experience virtually. Despite the fact that collaboration is hard to attain in online learning, it remains the key component in the virtual field experience (Luo et al., 2017). Vygotsky (1978) postulated that in any learning environment (either face-to-face or online), collaboration is indispensable. In this study, the level of collaboration, guidance, and support strengthened the relationships between preservice teachers, school mentor teachers, and faculty helped preservice teachers to progress and reach their zone of proximal development. Hence, the findings of this study concur with earlier findings of Luo et al. (2017) that creating positive relationships online among key stakeholders improved faculty and preservice teachers' perceptions about the virtual field placement and created an online community (Fiock, 2020). This is so because, through collaboration, school mentor teachers are trained by faculty to minimize inconsistencies and inefficiencies. Through collaboration, relationships between school mentor teachers and preservice teachers were enhanced as the former guided the latter. This concurs with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding, where a more knowledgeable and skilled person provides support based on the student's needs. The support is gradually removed as the student's ability to perform a particular task increases.

Preservice teachers' inability to engage young children in online learning was reported by faculty members as one of the main challenges they had during the virtual field experience. This finding resonates with the World Bank's (2020, p. 12) statement about the unsuitability of online learning among young children: "Early childhood education and foundational learning in early primary school, in particular, are likely to be negatively impacted … because children at this age (0–8 years) are less able to independently take advantage of remote learning programs and tools". Similarly, this finding concurs with previous research (i.e., Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020; Kim, 2020) affirming the difficulties to engage young children in an online classroom which impacts faculty and preservice teachers' perceptions of virtual field experience negatively. While this claim is well supported by empirical evidence, the virtual field experience can be seen as an opportunity for teachers and students alike to acquire skills needed in a digital-based environment. The 21st century requires preservice teachers to acquire knowledge and skills that allow them to be able to teach face-to-face and online (Boholano, 2017). The way teacher candidates are being prepared has changed, and there is a focus on online teaching since it has become the eminent skill needed in response to the global pandemic of COVID-19 (Evagorou & Nisiforou, 2020). After the pandemic, all preservice teachers are going to need both face-to-face and online skills for future careers (Luo et al., 2017). Hence, the findings of this study support previous claims made by Hojeij and Baroudi (2021) for preparing preservice teachers with the use of technology before going to classes and start delivering

instructions. Curriculum designers are recommended to redesign teacher preparation programs to expand teachers' knowledge about the available technologies and how to use them with their online instruction.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy to mention the additional factors that hindered the field experience and negatively impacted the faculty's perceptions. Lack of student engagement and motivation caused chaos and increased students' misbehavior in the online classroom which limited preservice teachers' ability to manage the classroom, know the student's academic needs, and differentiate the instruction according to their needs. In this case, the role of faculty as a mentor and guide was also threatened as they could not provide adequate support to preservice teachers considering their limited familiarity with individual students' needs. Unlike the findings of Luo et al. (2017), this result affirms that preservice teachers in the UAE preferred face-to-face instruction. Furthermore, students' and preservice teachers' limited technical knowledge and skills impacted their performance in the online classroom. This finding supports previous results of Flores and Gago (2020), Garrison et al. (2001), and Özüdoğru (2021) suggesting the necessity to train students and preservice teachers with the use of technology to increase the social cognitive presence and create an online learning community. As a result of these hindrances, faculty participating in this study expressed their worries about the lack of motivation and responsibility of Emirati preservice teachers that seemed to have been caused or exacerbated by the online setting. Therefore, it is argued here that the goals of the virtual field experience were not truly met, and similar to their worldwide peers, Emirati preservice teachers found it hard for them to complete their virtual field experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This paper focused on the perceptions of faculty members on Emirati preservice teachers' virtual field experiences during COVID-19 while using a phenomenological approach. This study examined these experiences on a small scale by analyzing in-depth the interpretations of experiences to catch the essence of the lessons learned. Thus, the framework put forth in this study could serve as a guideline for teacher education programs, especially field experience preparation. Hence, students' technological skills should be reinforced and built to enable purposeful and practical technological integration in the teaching and learning process.

The implication of the findings of this study shows that sustainable virtual field experiences can be attained through a collaborative approach. Collaboration is essential as it enables preservice teachers to succeed in implementing inclusive pedagogical approaches. Therefore, a holistic approach that is inclusive of all stakeholders is needed to upskill and develop the competencies of all parties involved in the process taking into consideration a more enriching collaborative manner. Such a redesign should be examined to assess its validity and efficiency on a wider and more diverse sample to ensure its reliability and success.

Nevertheless, the paper has a few limitations in its findings. First, the number and homogeneity of the chosen sample present limitations as it precludes generalizing the results attained. Second, the short timeline of the study across one semester of preservice teachers' field experiences that occurred at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic poses another limitation, as the whole world was struck unaware with global stress and a general disruption of previous practices. Thus, it could not proceed and inspect (1) the impact of the virtual experience on students' academic achievements and their future careers, (2) the online assessment of students' learning, and (3) early childhood school students' perceptions. In fact, further studies can enrich the findings of this paper by expanding the collected data to provide deeper and more generalizable results. For example, virtual preservice teachers' and school students' scores should be collected and compared to face-to-face scores in order to assess and evaluate the learning itself.

Hence, further studies are recommended to widen and vary the sample chosen to be studied and to include all stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning process especially young students' parents since findings showed that children under the age of eight are at a disadvantage in online learning.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine faculty perceptions of virtual field placement of preservice teachers at a university in the UAE. The study concluded that although faculty perceived the implementation of online learning in early childhood as a mammoth task that impacted their motivation towards online teaching, collaboration allowed for the attainment of desired results. Being placed in an online field experience enabled preservice teachers to gain intelligible digital literacy and was an eye-opener for curriculum designers of teacher preparation programs. The study has far-reaching implications for society at large. There is evidence that sustainable virtual field experiences are attainable through a collaborative approach. This is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism which places the interaction of stakeholders and scaffolding at the forefront. If we were to build adaptability in higher education, exploring faculty perceptions becomes the foundation for a successful teaching and learning experience.

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