



**Teaching Practicum Assessment Procedures
Adopted by Primary Teachers Colleges in
Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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Teaching Practicum Assessment Procedures Adopted by Primary Teachers' Colleges in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The study in hand investigated the assessment tools and procedures adopted by Primary Teachers' Colleges in Masvingo province of Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 caused massive disruptions to the continuity of teaching practicum (TP) and scheduled assessment activities. The transformative learning theory underpinned our study. A quantitative research design was used and data was gathered by means of online questionnaires that contained both closed and open-ended items. Findings indicated that TP assessment strategies did not change from physical lesson observations, and since assessments completely stopped at the peak of the pandemic due to the closure of schools hosting teacher trainees, the completion date of the course for teacher trainees was extended. Where lecturers eventually got access to schools, they resorted to the observation of TP files and supporting documents. Our study found that the assessment of teaching practicum online remains a challenge and there is a need to change assessment strategies in the post-COVID-19 era.

Keywords: Assessment, assessors, college lecturers, COVID-19, online teaching, mentors, micro-teaching, teaching practicum, teacher trainees, ZINTEC.



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused massive disruptions to the continuity of teacher training and assessment activities, thereby affecting and even threatening the course completion dates for many students (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2021). The pandemic forced several countries to cancel, reschedule or postpone training activities, thereby disrupting scheduled school-based and work-integrated learning assessments (Atkins & Danley, 2020).

The negative impact that school and training closures had on the learning outcomes for learners was greater in low-income countries where the delivery of courses and assessments online are also hampered by the lack of digital skills among teachers and students (Hondonga et al., 2021). The corona pandemic impacted the whole world, and the Zimbabwean school calendar was disrupted on 24 March 2020 to contain the spread of COVID-19 (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education [MoPSE], 2020). The Teaching Practicum (TP) component of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes was significantly disrupted, as the national lockdown period coincided with the time that many ITE students were engaged with TP in schools. In education, the term ‘teaching practicum’ is used interchangeably with concepts such as work-integrated learning (WIL), teaching practice, teaching experience, professional training or school-based training (Moosa, 2019). The school-based component of teacher training programmes in Zimbabwe is referred to as the Teaching Practice. It is seen as a purposeful, organised, supervised and assessed educational activity required for the completion of an ITE programme that integrates theoretical learning with its applications in the workplace (Macqual et al., 2021). In the current study, TP refers to the form of educational pedagogy that combines all the theoretical and practical knowledge that teacher trainees utilise when they are in schools (Batholmeus & Pop, 2019). Learning to teach is already a complex process that requires continuous guidance from lecturers, and the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and complicated the process even further. Teacher training institutions adopted various methods to continue their practice and prepare teacher trainees for the changed teaching conditions (Ersin et al., 2020). What remained important throughout the pandemic were the holistic concern for the professional progression of teacher trainees, the effects of missing learning during the practicum, and worries about the final TP assessment.

While the delivery of most theory lessons went online, TP and its assessment

could not be conducted online. This was due to a lack of digital equipment and technical knowledge to migrate to technologically based assessment strategies (Moyo, 2020). Some critics of online teaching argue that even where simulations can be done, distance and online learning do not really allow for the development of practical skills. Moreover, many institutions in developing countries like Zimbabwe cannot afford simulator technology (Bates, 2015; ILO-UNESCO-World Bank, 2021, p. 12) or technological innovations that have the potential to transform the way teacher educators support teacher trainees during teaching practice. However, with the right attitudes, skills, knowledge and behaviours of expert lecturers, student teachers may be enabled to practise teaching effectively in non-traditional ways (World Bank, 2020).

The current forms of support available to teacher trainees during teaching practicum – friends, peers, mentors, and college supervisors – are considered limited in a digitalised era (Bernhard & Camins, 2020). For example, the model of training for the 2-5-2 programme used in Zimbabwean Primary Teachers' Colleges makes it difficult for teacher educators to offer continuous support and guidance to teacher trainees during teaching practicum (Maguraushe, 2015). The support and guidance from college supervisors are mostly limited to occasional supervisory and post-lesson discussions which are sometimes conducted in haste. The present study also sought to identify any quality assurance systems for TP assessment that had been put in place to ensure that reliable and valid assessments are not compromised due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While several studies (Atkins & Danley, 2020; Cahapay, 2020; Gravett & Jiyane, 2019) have been conducted internationally, it is clear that in the Zimbabwean context, limited research is available on the assessment of teacher trainees while on teaching practice during a pandemic. We as authors therefore attempted to acquire a deeper understanding of the teaching practicum assessment of Zimbabwean teacher trainees during a crisis.

In a dichotomous model of teacher education, the teacher training college provides the pedagogical theory and skills about teaching through coursework, while the school provides the field setting where such knowledge is applied and practised (Worthy, 2005, p. 380). Thus, the field practice of teacher trainees complements the college-based aspects, as it allows prospective teachers to participate directly in the experience of teaching and to face the challenges of the real classroom environment (Worthy, 2005). Lecturers have to prepare teacher trainees to recognise and cope with the complexities of teaching so that they can participate in the educational setting in



an increasingly competent way. The main actors of TP are teacher trainees, school-based mentors, teacher educators or lecturers, and learners – in decreasing order of attention. This requires from colleges to work closely with schools in the supervision and assessment of teacher trainees on TP. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted not only the continuity of TP assessment activities but also college lecturers' support to students on TP; hence this study sought to find out how teacher training colleges managed to assess students during the pandemic.

Main research question

What assessment tools and procedures were adopted to assess teaching practicum (TP) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe?

Research sub-questions

- What assessment tools and procedures were used to assess teacher trainees during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe?
- What were the challenges for TP assessment of teacher trainees during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe?
- How can the assessment of TP be improved in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe?

A better understanding of innovative tools and procedures to assess TP during the COVID-19 pandemic might help to inform policymakers, researchers and teacher educators about assessment practices to be used during and after a crisis. The study further signposts directions for future research work and emphasises the need to invest in digital technologies to aid with the recording of teaching sessions and the transfer of such records. By transforming online assessment, the responsibility for assessment may be shared between training institutions and the schools that host pre-service teachers on TP.

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991)

The study was grounded in the transformative learning theory, which focuses on

enlightened agents of a change empowered with decision-making skills when faced with crises that threaten the existence of people (Mezirow, 2003). The theory is viewed partly as a development process theory, since transformation starts from a point of discomfort to guide action to a revised standpoint. Transformation occurs because of acute personal or social crises (like pandemics). When people are faced with experiences that are both stressful and painful and that threaten the very core of their existence, they will rely on acquired knowledge, existing technology and skills for survival. Based on this theory, our study explored the transformation of assessment innovations pursued by teacher training institutions during disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since transformative learning liberates and empowers people to question the status quo, it also enables them to take decisions. The study examined how new assessment strategies were utilised during the pandemic to achieve the intended assessments and refrain from compromising quality assurance processes.

Effects of COVID-19 on the assessment of TP

Health restrictions, protocols and recommendations aimed at managing the COVID-19 pandemic prohibited many people from getting into schools. For instance, Zimbabwe spent the whole of 2020 under lockdown in a bid to curb the spread of COVID-19. The almost universal move internationally by learning institutions towards the online delivery of teaching content, at relatively short notice, was unprecedented and has become one of the greatest disruptions to occur in education in general, and in teacher education in particular (Crawford et al., 2020). Since most schools that host teacher trainees on TP had to close, teacher trainees who were supposed to go on TP were affected. This completely disrupted the formative TP assessments that needed to be carried out to check students' progress. For instance, the ILO-UNESCO-World Bank (2021) survey found that, in some countries, work placements were cancelled, rescheduled, or postponed – due to a lack of a coordinated response to the challenge of not incorporating the assessment of work-integrated learning online. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, teacher trainees who were supposed to start their TP in May 2020 eventually started in March 2021, in line with the academic calendar. Assessment of TP was deferred by half a year (two terms), thereby extending the completion date of the course. However, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education (2021) advised that colleges might engage with the University of Zimbabwe's Centre for Teacher



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Development and Materials Production and highlight areas that need clarity regarding TP issues (Herald, 2021).

Regarding practicums for teacher education, several options can be explored, such as using an action research approach (Neil & Marais, 2020) or introducing remote TP. Other options can focus on the perceptions of students and mentors about using online messaging platforms like WhatsApp and functions such as surveys, file sharing, and video recordings. Further exploration can then focus on students' and mentors' experiences and challenges, as well as on the perceived benefits of using such platforms to guide upscaling and comply with technical, partnership, and practice-based requirements.

While school-based teacher trainees could continue with working and learning in the workplace under strict health restrictions, their competencies and skills development had to be assessed to meet course requirements (ILO-UNESCO-World Bank, 2021). This scenario prompted training institutions to adopt flexible, inclusive and sustainable assessment options dictated by the prevailing situation and the countrywide COVID-19 protocols. As the crisis unfolded, there was an urgent need for improved resources to provide new assessment methods. To date, the pandemic continues to present challenges and obstacles for everyone involved (Korucu-Kış, 2021). This has forced educator preparation programmes to invest in virtual learning professional development opportunities and revise the education programme by preparing teacher trainees to offer their future students a quality education, regardless of the instructional delivery format (Atikson & Danley, 2020). This means that in future, two forms of practicum will need to be incorporated – the face-to-face component as well as the online component. However, it remains a challenge to observe and assess teacher trainees in action and to evaluate their ability to manage a classroom and its environs continuously. This is a feat that may not easily be achieved remotely.

Assessment of Teaching Practice in Crisis Times

The pandemic has changed the way lessons are delivered and how assessments are conducted. The way in which the teaching practicum is conducted must be transformed with creative solutions and flexible innovations aimed at encouraging meaningful and relevant teaching and learning in times of crisis (Korucu-Kış, 2021). For example, a

study by Neil and Marais (2020) established that a teaching practicum experience via WhatsApp can offer a new way in which a university and a school, as sites of work-integrated learning, can work together to benefit all partners – including the school children. During the COVID-19 teaching practicum experience, the university or college lecturers, the mentor teachers and the teacher trainees were compelled to communicate, collaborate, supervise, monitor and mentor more purposefully than during traditional face-to-face school placement. Implementing a teaching practicum via WhatsApp in times of crisis can ensure that effective supervision, monitoring and mentoring can continue, while valuable communities of practice can also develop between the core partners (Neil & Marais, 2020).

In the large collection of studies by Ferdig et al. (2020), other authors focus specifically on the replacement of the practicum with strategies such as micro-teaching online, by using case studies involving virtual classroom technology and video-based assessment (Mollenkopf & Gaskill, 2020; Monroe et al., 2020; Yucesoy-Ozkan et al., 2020). Micro-teaching online can be done using selected learners who have or are provided with connectivity. In some instances, like in the United States of America, Murray State University implemented an online portfolio as a substitute for completing in-person practicum hours for teacher trainees who had been affected by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hendrith et al., 2020). Teacher trainees created a website and complied with practicum requirements by demonstrating lesson planning and teaching skills in the e-portfolio sites. Benander and Refaei (2016) posit that e-portfolios address the need for teacher trainees to develop digital identities and to communicate their pedagogy and technology practices. Research in colleges should also focus on improving practices in both colleges and schools, so as to equip future teachers with the requisite information and communication technology (ICT) skills to use modern technologies in their work and lesson delivery. Although these strategies were found to succeed, they require a significant investment in terms of the digital tools to be used and an uninterrupted internet connectivity. The latter remains a challenge in many countries, including Zimbabwe.

Alternatively, lecturers were found to record lessons and place them on YouTube before giving them to teacher trainees as case studies to critique and discuss. Teacher trainees were also provided with activities to do based on what they saw in the case studies. Dede et al. (2005) suggest that high-technology simulations using a virtual classroom are an effective means of giving teacher trainees practice with new skills



they are mastering in their teacher preparation courses. According to Dieker et al. (2017), teaching simulations can be immediately integrated into online learning contexts. This is possible in many ways, whether in synchronous teaching situations with peers or virtual simulations with avatars. An avatar is a personalised graphic file or rendering that represents a computer user or a student in an online environment. However, if funding for simulations is not available, a less costly alternative would be to provide a traditional micro-teaching experience via Skype (Piccolo et al., 2020).

Reflecting on current practices and planning – placing teacher trainees in virtual learning and teaching environments will ensure that they are given the instruction and support needed to be successful teachers in the future. According to Lambert (2020), extensive student teaching practice is required to earn most teaching credentials, and it is generally regarded as an essential part of a teacher's training before getting his or her classroom. However, the COVID-19 pandemic created a dilemma because opportunities for teaching practicum were limited. This required a shift in thinking, as teacher education programmes had to adapt the curriculum to a virtual format while engaging students in conversations on how to problem solve during a pandemic or crisis (Atkins & Danley, 2020). Our study therefore examined assessment tools and procedures adopted for teaching practice during the COVID-19 crisis in Zimbabwe.

Teaching Practicum of Primary School Teachers in Zimbabwe

Teaching practicum provides opportunities for teacher trainees to develop career-long learning skills, specific teaching competencies, and class-orientated managerial skills to enhance their professional identity development (Zegwaard et al., 2019). These processes create contexts of mentoring for pre-service teachers during their TP field experiences in schools, as the teacher trainees can put into practice their theoretical knowledge in a real classroom situation.

The 2-5-2 programme was introduced by the Zimbabwean Government in January 2002 as a merger of the Zimbabwe Integrated Teachers Education Course (ZINTEC) and the conventional model of training where student teachers spent more time on campus than in schools. According to Samkange (2013), the ZINTEC initiative was not a new development in the training of teachers and such initiatives were common in other parts of Africa. Most countries in Africa introduced such initiatives soon after attaining independence to alleviate the problem of teacher shortages (Zvobgo, 2003).

Cases in point are Botswana, Kenya, Malawi and Uganda, among others (Peroaton, 2010). Teacher trainees choose either the Early Childhood Development Programme (ECD) for grades ECD A to Grade 3 or the General Programme for Grades 4 to 7 for their training.

The 2-5-2 programme is a three-year diploma programme that prepares mainly primary school teachers at a distance, and it is structured in such a way that it has a longer teaching practicum period than the residential period (Maguraushe, 2015). The name of the 2-5-2 programme was derived from how the major components of the training programme were structured: two (2) Zimbabwean school terms (approximately 32 weeks) for the theoretical component at college; five (5) terms (approximately 80 weeks) continuously on teaching practicum; and another two (2) terms (approximately 32 weeks) for the theoretical component at college (Tshuma & Bhebhe, 2016). This teacher training programme is grounded in the philosophy that pre-service teachers can learn to teach on the job, even with limited prerequisite theory, skills and knowledge. Darling-Hammond (2017) refers to such a programme as a teacher's apprenticeship of some sort where teacher trainees learn – through observation and supervised teaching – what works in the classroom. During their field placement, which is some form of TP, teacher trainees are expected to integrate theory from their module courses with classroom practice in a purposefully designed college curriculum (Dollinger & Brown, 2019).

The teacher training programme has two main components: theory and practice. The theoretical component consists of courses in psychology, sociology, philosophy, applied education and an in-depth study of an academic area. These are covered during the first two terms and the last two terms of the course on campus (Maguraushe, 2015). The courses were designed to equip teacher trainees with knowledge of human behaviour, pedagogical content knowledge and disciplinary knowledge within the primary school curriculum. The second and more valuable component is the teaching practicum component, which occurs continuously over five terms in schools. It is within this component that teacher trainees are socialised into the profession as they experiment with teaching and learning approaches introduced in foundation and methods courses in a classroom setting (Lambert, 2020). Once deployed in their selected school, teacher trainees are assigned to a grade and attached to an experienced and qualified teacher who becomes their mentor. This is the person whom they would consult about almost all their teaching practice activities. Teacher trainees are



usually supervised, monitored and mentored by mentor teachers at the schools and by university lecturers during their teaching practicum (Bernhard & Camins, 2020). The conventional TP model of primary school teacher development in Zimbabwe is heavily embedded in all aspects of Open Distance Learning (ODL) (Tarusikirwa, 2016; Tshuma & Ndebele, 2015). Because of this scenario, practical TP assessments were negatively affected by the outbreak of COVID-19.

Research Methodology

A quantitative research design was used because adopted strategies from the participants could be quantified and comparisons be made more easily (Creswell, 2014). Data was gathered using online questionnaires containing both closed and open-ended items. The items solicited information on how colleges transformed assessment tools and procedures during the pandemic to ensure continuity of learning by teacher trainees. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select 14 respondents: 13 lecturers for training primary school teachers and one TP coordinator. A questionnaire was deemed appropriate for this study because it was inexpensive, practical, and could cover every aspect of the topic (Mouton, 2015). The questionnaire was validated by three independent experts in teacher education. Online questionnaires, which were distributed on Google forms to all participants in the sampled colleges, were used to effect social distancing and get instant feedback.

Three primary school teacher training colleges were purposely selected from Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe. The total number of lecturers in all these colleges was 240 and a sample of 50 was selected. The sample was relatively small as the participants were the only ones with accessible contacts during the period of study. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select the 50 respondents – among them 47 lecturers and three TP coordinators – to respond to the online survey. This helped to gather information on the perspectives of the lecturers and TP coordinators from various college contexts, since they are involved in the assessment of pre-service teachers on TP. Only 14 responses were received, giving a response rate of 28%. Despite this low response rate, the findings gave important and authentic insights into teacher educators' practices in times of emergency. The fact that there were some COVID-19 cases at one of the colleges during the time of data collection may have contributed to the low response rate. Descriptive statistics were used to present the

research results, and quantitative analysis and descriptions were used for clarification. Open-ended questions were thematically analysed.

Permission to conduct this research was sought from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (the ministry that oversees all training colleges in Zimbabwe), and from the respondents. Researchers adhered to the ethical principles of human rights, honesty, fairness, respect for individuals' reputation, and confidentiality of collected information to ensure that the respondents were not exposed to any risk by taking part in this study (Creswell, 2014; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

Findings

Pre-pandemic TP assessment strategies

Among the 14 respondents, four (28.6%) indicated that they were lecturers at government teacher training colleges, nine (64.3%) were at private teacher training colleges, and one (7.1%) was a TP coordinator in one of the colleges. All 14 respondents indicated that TP was mandatory in their colleges, thus suggesting that each student had to go to TP, be assessed and pass before graduating.

Findings also indicated that before the COVID-19 pandemic, TP assessment was done with college-based assessors, school-based mentors, school headmasters and university-based external assessors (see Table 1). In some cases ($n=2$, 14.3%), assessors from other colleges would assess teacher trainees.

Table 1: TP assessors pre-pandemic

Assessor	Frequency	%
College-based assessors	14	100
School-based supervisors/mentors	11	78.6
School headmasters	12	85.7
Assessors from other colleges	2	14.3
University-based external assessors	12	85.7



As shown in Table 2, TP was generally assessed pre-pandemic through lesson observations by college assessors, mentors, headmasters and university-based external assessors. Documentary (file) assessment was also carried out in schools (64.3%).

Table 2: Methods of TP assessment used by the colleges pre-pandemic

Method	Frequency	%
Observation of trainees in a class by college assessors	14	100
Observations of trainees by school-based supervisors or mentors	12	85.7
Observations by school headmasters	12	85.7
Observations by assessors from other colleges	3	21.4
Documentary assessment in schools	9	64.3
Observation by university-based external assessors	12	85.7

As to how feedback on assessment was communicated to colleges, 92.9% of respondents indicated that this was done physically, while 7.1% stated that online platforms were used.

TP Assessment during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 3 indicates how the TP assessment was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most assessments during the pandemic were still using the old system (n= 10, 71.4%). This suggested no or little transformation of the assessment methods that had been used before the pandemic. Six respondents (42.9%) indicated that the TP assessment was postponed.

Table 3: TP assessment during the pandemic

Item	Frequency	%
Continued with the old system of assessment	10	71.4
Changed the assessment strategy	3	21.4

Postponed assessment	6	42.9
Stopped assessment completely	0	0

The majority of respondents indicated that in some instances, colleges awarded marks based on a document (file) assessment, since they could not access schools. Respondents indicated that since the students were already on TP, it was practically difficult to disseminate information on how to use alternative assessment strategies to the teacher trainees. According to respondents, some students were not easily accessible online. The outbreak caught everyone unawares and it was extremely difficult to put new assessment strategies in place.

Table 4: Alternative assessment strategies adopted for TP assessment

Were you familiar with alternative TP assessment strategies that were implemented during the pandemic?	
Response	%
Yes, entirely	27
Yes, partially	27
No	46

Table 4 shows that most assessors were familiar with alternative TP assessment strategies which were implemented during the pandemic.

Some lecturers created WhatsApp groups for teacher trainees to discuss progress on research projects. Respondents highlighted that alternative assessment strategies were not approved by the certifying university. They suggested that this lack of quality assurance could affect the certification of students since the colleges were affiliated with the university. The majority of respondents felt that switching to online strategies remained a challenge.



Challenges to the use of new TP assessment tools and methods

TP assessment activities were seriously affected. For instance, the majority of schools were closed during lockdowns and as such, no TP assessment venues were available. Although 59% of the respondents indicated that additional resources were deployed to create new TP assessment methods, 33% said no additional resources were added in their institutions and 8% were not aware of any (see Table 5).

Table 5: Additional resources to support alternative assessment strategies

Did the institution allocate resources to expand the use of new assessment strategies?	
Response	%
Yes	59
No	33
I don't know	8

Several issues were raised in response to an open-ended question concerning challenges about TP assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Lesson observations and documents such as hard copy files could not be assessed, since travelling was restricted.
- Online assessment was prevented since both lecturers and students lacked ICT tools and access to the internet. Besides the fact that there were no effective platforms to use for doing online TP assessment, respondents suggested that the situation was further exacerbated by poor internet connectivity and high data cost.
- Inadequate resources and support from colleges affected TP assessment.
- No proper scheduling could be made of assessment activities between colleges and trainee teachers due to the speed of the spread of the COVID-19 disease, uncertainties about and fear of the disease, and caution by all parties (school authorities, assessors and trainee teachers).
- The lack of flexibility among both trainees and assessors to accept change was a major setback.

Improvement of TP assessment after the COVID-19 pandemic

Since new digital technology-based strategies had to be adopted to augment existing TP assessment methods, it was necessary to determine the extent to which colleges were investing in and developing the new strategies. Table 6 shows that nine respondents (81.8%) thought that teacher training colleges were actually trying to create virtual environments for TP assessments; however, there was no clear indication of the implementation of a particular method.

Table 6: Institutions' investment in new assessment methods

Method of assessment introduced	Frequency	%
Encouraging the use of video conferences	3	27.3
Developing simulations	1	9.1
Creating a virtual learning environment	9	81.8
Developing videos	3	27.3
Using YouTube	1	9.1
Using Podcasts	0	0
Other	2	18.2

Responding to the open-ended question on how TP assessment could be improved in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of respondents highlighted a need for training lecturers to implement new assessment strategies. Furthermore, they indicated the need for staff development in respect of ICT skills, since most activities were in the process of transitioning online. Respondents furthermore argued that schools also needed to conduct lessons online if TP were to continue during and after the pandemic.

Discussion

The study gathered data from both private and public teachers' colleges. This mix of colleges gave the researchers insight into different response strategies used for TP



assessment during the pandemic. All respondents indicated that TP was mandatory in their colleges, which implies that each student had to go to TP, be assessed and pass before graduating. Our findings suggest that TP assessments in teacher training colleges were normally conducted by means of lesson observations by college assessors, mentor teachers in schools, headmasters and university-based external assessors. TP assessment activities were seriously affected, *inter alia* because the majority of schools were closed during lockdowns (Atkins & Danley, 2020) and left training institutions without access to any TP assessment venues. Our findings also revealed that little transformation was made to TP assessment methodologies during the pandemic. The rate of transformation was limited by the following:

- A lack of effective platforms for TP assessment.
- A lack of collaboration between colleges, schools and the university.
- Limited resources deployed to create and adopt new TP assessment methods.
- Limited skills of both lecturers and teacher trainees on the use of other/new methods for TP assessment.
- A lack of access to online facilities/tools, both in schools and in colleges (for teacher trainees and lecturers).
- Poor internet connectivity and high data cost.

Assessment of TP was deferred by half a year (two terms), thereby extending the duration/completion date of the course. Although some lecturers created WhatsApp groups for teacher trainees to discuss their progress, this was not a long-lasting solution as it was not sustainable and not consistent for all colleges, lecturers and teacher trainees. Neil and Marais (2020) nevertheless suggest that facilitating a teaching practicum via WhatsApp in times of crisis can ensure that effective supervision, monitoring and mentoring can continue, with valuable communities of practice developing between the core partners.

Hard copy lesson observations and documents such as files could not be assessed, since travelling was restricted. Many lecturers (college assessors) were just comfortable using their old ways of assessment – probably due to a lack of resources or innovation, or simply not being flexible (Hondonga et al., 2020). Our also findings revealed that most assessors were not familiar with alternative assessment strategies. Piccolo et al. (2020) argue that teacher education programmes need research and guidance

on how to support student teachers in alternative teaching and learning formats, while maintaining high standards and best practices. Their study established that there was neither adequate training of lecturers and teacher trainees on the use of new assessment strategies, nor effective platforms to use for the online TP assessment. This finding disagrees with that of Benander and Refaei (2016) who stressed that future teachers must be equipped with the requisite ICT skills to use modern technologies when doing their work and delivering lessons. One of the most important aspects of a teaching practicum is the gathering of evidence that the student teacher is gaining greater confidence and displaying a wider range of sophisticated competences during the process. An e-portfolio of reflections on practice can help to provide evidence of this in a way that lesson observations often fail to do – unless the class is visited several times during the practicum. The latter is often not affordable if the course is lecture-based.

The responses in Table 6 suggest that not much was invested into the development or implementation of innovative TP assessment platforms and technologies that were required to support the changes induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the main challenge involved financial resources, efforts to switch from face-to-face TP assessment methods to digitised platforms were futile when teacher trainees were based in rural schools where there was no access to electricity and internet connectivity. In addition, many schools and students cannot afford the required digital devices (Hondonga et al., 2021). Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, as well as uncertainties about and fear of the disease, it was very difficult to organise the scheduling of TP assessment activities between colleges and teacher trainees. Since teacher trainees were already engaged in their TP, no new assessment strategies were in place. It was virtually impossible to disseminate and teach teacher trainees on the use of alternative assessment strategies since many were not easily accessible online. This deviates from the suggestion by Monroe et al. (2020) that micro-teaching online can be done using selected learners who have or are provided with connectivity. Teacher trainees and assessors were found to be not flexible to accept the change compelled by the pandemic. There were no TP venues since schools and colleges had closed. Where assessments continued for a while, college assessors were using manual assessment instruments and direct observations. However, this arrangement was inadequate for certification by the university with which the colleges were affiliated.



Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study – and even after the pandemic – it was considered essential that new methods of TP assessment be put in place to augment physical classroom observations by college assessors. Teacher trainees need to gain experience at using e-learning management platforms in order to qualify and be effective teachers. The transition to online teaching-learning is almost inevitable, and unless the curriculum is transformed, many will remain inadequately skilled and ineffective in modern-day lesson delivery dominated by digital technologies. Such teachers will be marginalised and end up in poorly resourced schools where their inadequacies will not be exposed. It is also important to plan for follow-up staff development in respect of lesson delivery to this cohort of teachers, even when they are qualified, so as to provide any support they might have missed because of the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Additional resources need to be deployed for research to reimagine, rebuild and find suitable TP assessment methods going forward. Such methods are essential if future teacher trainees are to be assessed in action during a crisis similar to the COVID-19 pandemic. More collaboration needs to be established between colleges, universities, schools and parents to open up online TP assessment opportunities. This corroborates the suggestion made by Dieker et al. (2017), namely that teaching simulations can be immediately integrated into online learning contexts in many ways – whether in synchronous teaching situations with peers or in virtual simulations with avatars. Quality assurance processes also need to be revisited to accommodate online TP assessment. A follow-up study on the efficacy of the new TP assessment strategies is necessary to check whether the strategies are feasible, what challenges they pose and whether the identified challenges can be mitigated.

Conclusion

Little transformation occurred in primary school teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe during the pandemic, as most of them were still using the traditional TP assessment methods and tools such as school visits for lesson observation. Overall, failure to quickly transform to new assessment methods suggested inequalities in ICT

resources in local colleges and schools, as well as among qualified and teacher trainees. This affected learning and programme completion for teacher trainees.

The study revealed that TP was postponed, since schools and colleges were closed. This undoubtedly had a negative effect on the level of support teacher trainees received during the COVID-19 pandemic, and could well affect teacher trainees' effectiveness in practice due to negative self-efficacy. The unprecedented disruption caused in schools and colleges by the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a long-lasting impact on the teaching profession and may affect student achievement for years to come.

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