

## **Challenges for practice teaching in UAE schools: Supervisors' and pre-service teachers' perceptions**

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Field experience, or practice teaching, or practicum has become a cornerstone of teacher education. It is a high-impact experience and a period of intense learning and growth if done professionally. While current research highlights the experiences of pre-service teachers as a catalyst for improving their perceptions, little is known about faculty supervisors' perceptions and the challenges they face during practicum courses. Hence, the aim of this study is to explore the experiences of the faculty supervisors (n=11) and pre-service teachers (n=69) throughout their time in the initial teacher program in the College of Education at Zayed University, a public university in the UAE, including any challenges they faced. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through surveys, individual interviews, and reflective journals. Results revealed that having a well-structured program, establishing strong collaboration and coordination with the partner schools, and ensuring direct contact with mentors are the factors that enhance the faculty supervisors' experience. Based on these findings, recommendations are made that focus on the areas of scheduling, logistics, requirements, and expectations of the program.

### **Introduction**

Teacher preparation programs are structured in a way to equip pre-service teachers with knowledge, skills, and experience necessary for teaching (Kent & Giles, 2016). Practice teaching has proven to positively affect the knowledge and skills of pre-service teachers in terms of bridging the gap between theory and practice. When in the field, pre-service teachers develop their pedagogical proficiencies, which allows them to better perform once they join the workforce (Hanline, 2010). Examples of these pedagogical proficiencies include, but are not limited to, planning for differentiated instruction (Kent & Giles, 2016), improving interaction and communication with students, and developing classroom management skills (Hamaidi, Al-Shara, Arouri & Abu Awwad, 2014). However, when in the field, pre-service teachers tend to face many challenges that may negatively impact their experiences. These challenges can vary from scheduling logistics to dealing with students from diverse backgrounds and abilities (Kent & Giles, 2016). While both pre-service teachers and their faculty supervisors share the field experience placement, they have different perspectives on their experiences. Additionally, research has shown that there are differences in the challenges faced by faculty supervisors and pre-service teachers during the field experience (Hanline, 2010).

Looking at the challenges faced by pre-service teachers, research indicates a variety of problematic areas, mainly in terms of accessing school materials and equipment, identifying students' needs, interests and motivation, meeting the curriculum objectives, and dealing with the overall classroom environment (Sarıçoban, 2010). Additionally, Hamaidi et al. (2014) identified other challenges related to pre-service teachers' personal issues and character dispositions that might hinder their progress in the field experience.

Additional challenges included lack of prior orientation and proper guidance from faculty supervisors, as well as lack of support from mentor teachers. Moreover, pre-service teachers reported ambiguity of practicum requirements and assessment guidelines as hampering their experiences in the field.

Faculty supervisors encounter several challenges while carrying out their supervisory duties during field experience. Meegan et al. (2013) identified five main challenges, based on two earlier studies by Borko and Mayfield (1995) and Bowyer and van Dyke (1988):

1. Limiting time constraints (such as lack of time needed for supervisors to be with the pre-service teachers on site);
2. Scheduling observation;
3. Commuting to multiple schools;
4. Balancing their teaching and research load with their supervisory duties;
5. Perceiving efforts as wasted as seen by the faculty supervisor concerning their feedback and judgment given to pre-service teachers. This later is related to the time constraints that are hindering the faculty supervisor to be at all times in the field.

Perceptions of the practice teaching experience challenges of pre-service teachers and faculty supervisors vary. Much of the literature has examined student-teacher perceptions with little attention to the faculty supervisors (Cuenca, 2010). The role of the faculty supervisor is very powerful in preparing student teachers through employing the best pedagogical practices during this process. Considering that their work of supervision is an endless learning journey to produce qualified pre-service teachers, literature is always needed to investigate the challenges that hinder faculty supervisors from employing these best practices especially in the UAE, where research in teacher education is still emerging. Therefore, there is a need for further research, development, and implementation of a framework to better prepare pre-service teachers for their future careers, while taking into consideration the faculty supervisors' and pre-service teachers' perceptions.

Hence, this study is based on the following research questions:

1. What are pre-service teachers' perceptions about the successes and challenges of the field experience?
2. How do faculty supervisors perceive their role and the challenges related to their roles?
3. What factors should be amended, changed, or added to reach better field experience results?

## **Literature review**

An effective teacher is the one who knows the content of the subject and employs the specific methodologies that are aligned with this subject for the particular school level (Voss, Kunter & Baumert, 2011). To produce effective teachers, universities have created practical teacher programs to provide student teachers with field experiences, to enhance their teaching and learning experiences, and to increase their competence. The main focus

of these programs is to provide novice teachers with real classroom experiences. Teacher preparation programs are based on a cooperative model between schools and universities with resources, strategies, and best practices to be shared (Lombardi, 2001). They provide an opportunity for student teachers to teach under the supervision of a more experienced teacher. They also give a chance for pre-service teachers to observe an experienced teacher, to interact with pupils, and to experience being in charge of a classroom (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987). The success of these programs has always relied on the quality of coaching or supervision offered. During the mentoring process, the teacher at the school becomes the mentor and the student teacher (pre-service teacher) becomes the mentee. Throughout the mentoring process, one expert or more experienced individual teaches or mentors another novice individual (Colvin, 2007). The principles of the constructivist theories and collaborative learning are at the core of the mentoring practice, when the cognitive skills and learning experiences of novice teachers are developed through the scaffold provided by their stronger peers (Colvin, 2007). Before accomplishing tasks independently, mentees (pre-service teachers) can perform them by collaborating with others and receiving some guidance and support (Crain, 2010). Along the same lines, the faculty supervisor's role is also that of a mentor, however, it is also an overall supervisory role. The faculty supervisor makes sure that both the school mentor and the pre-service teacher are meeting the expectations of the program (Baroudi, Tamim & Hojeij, 2020).

Moreover, the current study is also situated in the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978). It is argued that through the social interaction and collaboration between the mentor and mentee, learning is promoted, and overall performance is improved (Crain, 2010). Individuals' learning is influenced by their experiences with their environment (Vygotsky, 1978). As such, pre-service teachers' learning is then shaped by their experiences with the school setting, supervisors, and mentors. The context of the teacher preparation programs constructs pre-service teachers' situated learning. In such programs, pre-service teachers are offered specific content, pedagogical, instructional coursework, along with different types of field-based experiences (Clark, Byrnes & Sudweeks, 2015).

Even though teacher education programs provide teachers with teaching methodologies, novice teachers most often fail in applying these in classrooms (Hamdan, 2015). They are unaware of how to engage students and raise their interest in the subject taught. Furthermore, pre-service teachers doubt that they are capable of improving students' learning during field experience (Hamdan, 2015). That is why they need more support from their mentor to ensure that they master the subject content and to follow student-centred approaches in their teaching techniques. Through modeling vicarious experiences, pre-service teachers' self-confidence and teaching ability increases (Clark, Byrnes & Sudweeks, 2015).

Research studies have shown that some mentors are not properly trained to guide pre-service teachers (Altan & Saqlamel, 2015). Hence, the feedback that they provide to their mentees is more general, related to the teaching methods, and does not improve their tasks and responsibilities. Many of those agree to mentor pre-service teachers for the additional pay rather than for their commitment to the practicum tasks (Altan &

Saqlam, 2015). Additionally, teacher mentors may be more focused on their students than on the pre-service teachers most of the time. As a result, they fail to give constructive feedback to mentees, and the relationship between them becomes a limited one-way relationship. This type of relationship is usually expected in the mentoring process, where the power of relations is usually hierarchical, where mentees are the less experienced and submissive (Colvin, 2007). While this is naturally expected, improving the nature of relationships and strengthening the trust between the two will enhance the overall field experience quality. Therefore, Altan and Saqlam (2015) suggested for the faculty of education and schools to be more careful when selecting school mentors. In order to improve the quality of supervision, mentors should be chosen based on both their teaching and supervision skills and they should show some enthusiasm towards the supervision process (Saqlam, 2015).

On the other hand, the highest aim of these preparation programs is to provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to bridge the theory learned in their courses with the practical field experience (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987; Lombardi, 2001). However, the gap of bridging theory and practice is identified as a challenge for pre-service teachers (Hamdan, 2015). Limited interactions between faculty and student teachers, poor preparation for the supervision work (Cuenca, 2010) and poor quality of mentoring from mentors (Altan & Saqlam, 2015) are all reasons behind this gap. Additionally, not being in the field for a long duration prevents pre-service teachers from being more competent in applying knowledge in the classroom (Hamdan, 2015). Being in the field for longer time will increase pre-service teachers' engagement and confidence level and provide them with repetitive opportunities to become capable of explaining abstract and/or complex concepts to students. Extending the duration with adequate mentoring, modeling, guidance and support builds teacher self-efficacy to perform instructional tasks (Clark, Byrnes & Sudweeks, 2015).

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), field experience is seen as a venue for Emirati pre-service teachers to develop their self-awareness and problem-solving skills in the classroom (Clarke & Otaky, 2006). This is because through the practical field experience, pre-service teachers are able to co-construct and renegotiate their teaching knowledge with their existing experiences and understanding (Clarke & Otaky, 2006). Additionally, field experience provides female teachers with the opportunity to enhance their problem-solving skills and promote their competence in selecting the best teaching strategies to overcome classroom obstacles (Krug et al., 2015). Enhancing pre-service teachers' problem-solving skills is strongly associated with students' learning and performance levels (Gürşen Otacıoğlu, 2008) and a determinant of overall classroom success (Krug et al., 2015). To this end, educators in the UAE are strongly recommended to focus on improving the quality of these practices if they wish to fulfill the call for improving the country's educational system. For instance, giving pre-service teachers the chance to observe mentors in action helps to promote their teaching strategies specifically in identifying and meeting students' individual needs as well as gaining classroom management skills. It would also contribute to the enhancement of the overall quality of field experience (Hojeij & Baroudi, in press 2021).

Field experience has become the cornerstone of teacher education. Practice teaching is a high impact experience and a period of intense learning and growth if it is done professionally (Altan & Saqlamel, 2015, p.13). If done at a superficial level, it might cause deep dissatisfaction for pre-service teachers, mentors, and supervisors. The role of mentors in the field experience process is crucial for mentees' transition into the teaching profession. That is why, the cooperating mentor should be qualified and prepared to give the right support to pre-service teachers (Altan & Saqlamel, 2015). When the teacher education programs are not well coordinated, faculty supervisors tend to fail in preparing teachers to deal with the various complexities of teaching practices. Additionally, it is recommended for universities to continuously reward and recognise faculty supervisors' efforts in conducting research in teacher education programs (Zeichner, 2010).

Measuring the perceptions of pre-service teachers is one way to gauge the impact of teacher preparation programs on their teaching preparedness and abilities. While current research highlights the experiences of pre-service teachers as a catalyst to improve their perceptions, little is known about this in the Middle East and particularly in the UAE. Additionally, few studies have examined faculty supervisors' perceptions and challenges during their practica courses (Cuenca, 2010). Clearly, more research is needed to provide empirical evidence about the field-based experiences along with the challenges faced specifically in the UAE.

## **Method**

### **Context**

The current study was conducted in the teacher preparation program of the College of Education at a public, all-female university in the UAE. The Early Childhood Education program requires students to complete 120 credits over a period of 8 consecutive semesters. The pre-service teachers participate in 4 teaching practice placements in their last 4 semesters. This study focused on the last 2 placements: Practicum III and Internship. In Practicum III, which takes place in semester 7, students spend 10 teaching days in a school where they focus on reflection, lesson planning, and whole class teaching. The 10 teaching days are spread over 10 weeks of placement as one day per week. The final placement is a full-time teaching internship, in semester 8, where they are expected to take over an early childhood class wholly for the duration of the full semester as well as conduct an intervention action research project.

While the majority of Emiratis choose to teach in government schools, teacher candidates are placed in both public and private schools during their studies to gain equal experience. Their placement allows them to receive training to become homeroom teachers. They are supposed to teach basic English, Arabic, maths, and science at the elementary level, with an emphasis on fundamental knowledge and recognition of main concepts. They teach their lessons under the guidance of their mentor teachers who are the actual classroom teachers.

The mentor teachers assign the pre-service teachers lessons to teach according to the class curriculum plan. They also conduct daily briefing sessions with them to reflect on the day and plan for the next. Mentor teachers are chosen by the school and approved by the college based on their qualifications and teaching experience. Each mentor is assigned one pre-service teacher per semester. Mentor teachers conduct lesson observations to evaluate the pre-service teachers' performance formatively and summatively throughout their placement.

Pre-service teachers are also assigned a faculty supervisor, who is the course professor. The faculty supervisor role is not as involved as the teacher mentors as they are not involved in the daily teaching practice. Faculty supervisors conduct regular school visits as well as formal and informal teaching observations to track the progress of their students. Overall, teacher mentors and faculty supervisors work together to ensure the pre-service teachers are receiving a multi-faceted, successful field experience.

### **Design**

This study followed an exploratory approach in order to gain background information that helps to understand the problem, explore the research questions and have a better understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative methods are the best to further study the subject in detail and provide an overall picture of the experiences and challenges that pre-service teachers and faculty supervisors face. Also, collecting quantitative data through surveys helped the researcher identify relevant variables and understand participants' opinions about the development of their teaching experience throughout the whole program.

### **Participants**

A purposeful sampling technique was used in this study. This type of sampling helps the researcher discover, understand, and gain insight about the topic from individuals from which the most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Hence, 69 pre-service teachers and their faculty supervisors (n=11) were invited to participate in the study. 58% of pre-service teachers were completing their field experience in public schools while 42% were placed in private schools. As for the faculty supervisors (n=11) they all had more than 10 years of teaching experience and had taught practicum and internship courses for more than 5 years.

At the end of the field experience, a total 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty supervisors in their offices to generate in-depth narratives about their experiences during the field experience and the factors that hindered and/or enhanced the efficiency of their supervisory role. Furthermore, faculty supervisors and pre-service teachers were asked to keep a monthly journal about their weekly challenges that they faced during their field experience. Finally, pre-service teachers completed a survey that included both open and close-ended items, thus generating both quantitative (nominal, ordinal and scale data) and qualitative data.

All participants provided consent for using the information from the interviews, reflective journals, and interviews for this study. Pseudonyms were used for faculty and pre-service teachers. Participants were assured that this research aimed only to acquire information about their experiences during the field experience, and that that no judgments would be made on their competencies.

### **Data collection**

The data collection process was based on three evidence tools to help the researcher develop a complex picture of the phenomenon and describe the larger picture that emerges (Creswell, 2014).

The first one was the survey for pre-service teachers, which yielded both quantitative and qualitative results. This survey (Appendix A) was developed by the researcher based on the literature exploring the benefits of field experience for the development of teaching skills for pre-service teachers (i.e., Meegan et al., 2013).

The second tool was one-on-one interviews to generate in-depth data and faculty supervisors' subjective views and opinions (Creswell, 2014). Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes. A total of 10 semi-structured questions (Appendix B) collected participants' perceptions about their experience and addressed three main categories: (1) description of their role, (2) factors that developed or hindered the efficiency of their supervisory role, (3) challenges that in their opinion pre-service teachers face during their field experience. The interviews were conducted in English, recorded and later transcribed and coded anonymously, highlighting common trends and points of view.

The third tool was the reflective journals addressing faculty supervisors' and pre-service teachers' weekly challenges (Appendix C). These journals elicited rich descriptions of participant experiences and weekly challenges during their field placement. Faculty supervisors emailed their reflective journals to the researcher at the end of each month of the academic semester. Pre-service teachers were asked to type their reflections and submit them on *Blackboard* as part of their course requirements. These reflective journals gave the participants the chance to express any opinions or suggestions that they missed in the survey or in the interviews or did not feel comfortable sharing in person.

### **Data analysis**

The researcher combined and reviewed the data extracted from the surveys, interview transcriptions, and written journals to make general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning. An inductive data analysis was followed to build patterns and categories from the bottom up (Creswell, 2014). As such, the researcher manually analysed the data generated from the surveys, interviews, and journals and worked back and forth between the themes until a comprehensive set was established. A thematic analysis was followed to compare and combine data and extract common themes. The quantitative data was analysed to extract percentages of participants' answers for each question.

In order to increase the reliability procedures, a team of two researchers met to agree on the common themes and ensure consistency of the coding (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Also to ensure the trustworthiness and accuracy of the findings, the data was triangulated by collecting and examining evidence from multiple data sources (interviews, reflections, and journals) and used to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell, 2008).

## Results

### RQ 1: Pre-service teachers' perceptions about the successes and challenges of field experience

To answer the first question regarding the perceptions of pre-service teachers about field experience, quantitative and qualitative data from surveys were analysed and presented below.

Most pre-service teachers agreed that field experience helped them develop content knowledge of the subject they teach (49.3%) and develop their teaching strategies (52.2%). The results also suggest that field experience helped them design better lectures (56.5%) and assessments (47.8%), and understand students; it gave them a chance to reflect on their teaching (52.2%), communicate better with their colleagues and supervisors (50.8%), and grow professionally (53.6%). Furthermore, the majority of the respondents agreed that, in their class, they created an environment of respect (68.1%), established a culture of learning (49.3%), engaged the students in their own learning, and demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness. Survey answers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Survey questions about field experience

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. The field experience helped me develop my knowledge of the material I will teach.	0 (0%)	11 (15.9%)	24 (34.8%)	34 (49.3%)
2. The field experience helped me develop my teaching strategies.	2 (2.9%)	6 (8.7%)	25 (36.2%)	36 (52.2%)
3. The field experience helped me set clear instructional outcomes.	1 (1.4%)	11 (16%)	21 (30.4%)	36 (52.2%)
4. The field experience helped me better understand my students and how they learn.	3 (4.3%)	8 (11.6%)	26 (37.7%)	32 (46.4%)
5. The field experience helped me design clear lessons.	2 (2.9%)	8 (11.6%)	20 (29%)	39 (56.5%)
6. The field experience helped me design student assessments.	2 (2.9%)	16 (23.2%)	18 (26.1%)	33 (47.8%)
7. The field experience gave me the chance to reflect on my teaching regularly.	3 (4.3%)	7 (10.1%)	23 (33.3%)	36 (52.2%)
8. The field experience helped me keep accurate records of my students' work and progress.	3 (4.3%)	15 (21.8%)	25 (36.2%)	26 (37.7%)
9. In my field experience, I communicated with my mentor regularly.	4 (5.8%)	6 (8.7%)	16 (23.2%)	43 (62.3%)

10.	In my field experience, I communicated with my supervisor regularly.	4 (5.8%)	7 (10.1%)	23 (33.3%)	35 (50.8%)
11.	The field experience allowed me to participate in school activities.	7 (10.1%)	9 (13%)	18 (26.1%)	35 (50.8%)
12.	The field experience helped me grow professionally.	1 (1.4%)	9 (13%)	22 (32%)	37 (53.6%)
13.	The field experience helped me behave professionally by being an example to my students.	1 (1.4%)	6 (8.7%)	21 (30.4%)	41 (59.4%)
14.	In my class, I created an environment of respect and good relationship with my students.	3 (4.3%)	5 (7.2%)	14 (20.3%)	47 (68.1%)
15.	In my class, I established a culture of learning.	2 (2.9%)	9 (13%)	24 (34.8%)	34 (49.3%)
16.	In my class, I managed classroom procedure easily.	3 (4.3%)	15 (21.8%)	27 (39.1%)	24 (34.8%)
17.	In my class, I managed my students' behavior.	3 (4.3%)	11 (16%)	27 (39.1%)	28 (40.6%)
18.	In my class, I organised the physical space of my classroom.	13 (18.8%)	16 (23.2%)	17 (24.6%)	23 (33.3%)
19.	In my class, I communicated with my students clearly.	1 (1.4%)	7 (10.1%)	17 (24.6%)	44 (63.8%)
20.	In my class, I used questioning and discussion techniques.	2 (2.9%)	9 (13%)	18 (26.1%)	40 (58%)
21.	In my class, I engaged my students in their own learning.	2 (2.9%)	6 (8.7%)	20 (29%)	41 (59.4%)
22.	In my class, I used assessments in instruction.	4 (5.8%)	7 (10.1%)	21 (30.4%)	37 (53.6%)
23.	In my class, I demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness.	3 (4.3%)	6 (8.7%)	25 (36.2%)	35 (50.8%)
24.	The field experience helped me to practice preparation of daily lesson plans.	6 (8.7%)	9 (13%)	16 (23.2%)	38 (55.1%)
25.	The field experience prepared me to set challenging learning outcomes.	3 (4.3%)	12 (17.4%)	23 (33.3%)	31 (44.9%)
26.	The field experience helped me to improve my classroom management skills.	5 (7.2%)	7 (10.1%)	17 (24.6%)	40 (58%)
27.	The field experience helped me to create resources to support my students' learning.	3 (4.3%)	12 (17.4%)	15 (21.8%)	39 (56.5%)
28.	The field experience helped me to use resources to support my students' learning.	3 (4.3%)	5 (7.2%)	15 (21.8%)	46 (66.7%)
29.	The field experience expanded my abilities to use teaching strategies to suit individual students.	3 (4.3%)	10 (14.5%)	20 (29%)	36 (52.2%)
30.	The field experience expanded my abilities to use teaching strategies to suit groups of students in my class.	3 (4.3%)	10 (14.5%)	20 (29%)	36 (52.2%)
31.	The field experience expanded my abilities to use teaching strategies to suit individual whole classes.	4 (5.8%)	9 (13%)	23 (33.3%)	33 (47.8%)
32.	The field experience helped me to differentiate my lessons to meet my students' diverse needs.	3 (4.3%)	7 (10.1%)	21 (30.4%)	38 (55.1%)
33.	The field experience increased my abilities in using multiple methods of assessing student work.	6 (8.7%)	10 (14.5%)	19 (27.5%)	34 (49.3%)

The analysis of the pre-service teachers' open-ended survey questions regarding the successes and challenges of the program, produced three themes: one on the level of the development of their teaching skills and practices, another on the level of scheduling and logistics, and the third one regarding the limited flexibility of the program. Overall, pre-service teachers acknowledged that they benefited from the field experience on many levels including curriculum design, strategies, activities, lesson planning, teaching skills, and classroom management. One participant said, "Everything was good: curriculum, strategies, how to do lesson plan; it helped us develop our knowledge, teaching skills and strategies." Another participant mentioned, "field experience prepares us to be a teacher in the future, it helped me to think of new strategies for the teaching and assessment of the students."

Almost all pre-service teachers reported that the training they received was properly scheduled, especially in relation to the number of lessons they taught. Duration was also good in terms of time spent in class and the overall duration of the program. They also reported that attending private schools was very beneficial. Some illustrative examples are "the field experience chose only the higher ranking schools where we can learn from which is very good for our professional development." Another one said, "... I would keep the number of lessons whether it is full or mini in each practicum." On the other hand, many participants suggested that it would be better to teach for ten consecutive days instead of once per week over 10 weeks. They believed that this way they will get to experience different days and activities in their schools and get to know the students and the system more, instead of meeting students once per week and not being able to connect with them easily. One candidate believed that they should "add more visits during different days of the week so the teacher candidates can experience different schedules and activities." And another mentioned, "it will be better if we can go every day to school because that help to increase the relationship between a teacher and student."

Another problem they faced was the schedule. They complained about the long hours spent in schools and the proximity of the schools to their homes. Logistically, it seemed that some pre-service teachers were not happy the school they were given, or the long hours they needed to spend commuting, especially as not all of them drove or had their own means of transportation. This created an obstacle as transportation is not a service the university offers and each pre-service teacher has to arrange her own way to her field placement. One preservice-teacher said, "Change the time we need to come to school because we come very early and we leave very late." Another one said,

If the university provides the transportation it would be better, because some students don't have any one free to drive them to school and some cannot go very far driving like me it takes 40 minutes for me to get to the school and in the morning, there is traffic everywhere.

In their accounts, most pre-service teachers highlighted how useful the mentors' and supervisors' observation and feedback were in addition to the field experience handbook provided by the Education Studies department at the college, which they used throughout their placement. At the same time, many identified the importance of the flexibility in the

attendance schedule, in choosing lessons, and even in the creation of their own lessons which meant they had their own input. During their placement, they were asked to rely on the mentors' input about the class curriculum and what lessons they needed to teach. One participant reported,

I believe that the field experience is a good opportunity for education students because it develops students' skills and gives the students an experience. I think letting us create lessons for students is really helpful because it gives us the chance to engage with the students and to know if we are good for this job.

Still, some complained about the choice of mentors because some were seen as unfair. Some also believed that they should be given scope to choose the levels they would like to teach and the lessons they would like to teach. They asked for more flexibility and autonomy. They also complained about the numerous assignments they were asked to complete during their field experience. Some participants noted that "teacher candidates must try teaching different ages and grades to know what suits them the most." Giving pre-service teachers the choice to select the level and subjects in which they want to practise their teaching skills would increase their autonomy and motivation. These female students coming from a traditional background have limited independence. As such, having this autonomy would impact their freedom of choice and develop their confidence skills.

All in all, it was clear that pre-service teachers were of different opinions regarding what they think should be kept and what should be changed. One basic difference was the idea that they would like to do their practical teaching in private schools to learn more, versus the ones who preferred to be placed in public schools because eventually this is where they will teach. Being placed in private schools would expose pre-service teachers to a multicultural educational environment where they can learn different teaching practices and styles from their expatriate mentors.

## **RQ 2: Faculty supervisors' perceptions about their role and challenges related to their roles**

As for the role of supervisors and the challenges they faced during field experience, qualitative data from individual interviews and reflective journals were combined and the thematic analysis produced three main themes: (1) differences in supervisors and mentors' roles; (2) key factors of comfort and problematic factors; and (3) pre-service teachers' strengths and weaknesses.

Faculty supervisors understand that their role is to guide pre-service teachers to become effective teachers and increase their awareness of ethics in teaching. Through their answers, it was very clear that they saw their role and the mentors' role as very similar: guidance and support. However, they explained that mentors give guidance that is more related to classroom routines and in-class teaching practice. For instance, mentors guide the pre-teachers in lesson planning, teaching activities, and classroom management strategies. Furthermore, faculty supervisors noted that "the mentor is like a model showing them how to teach and act inside the classroom." Hence, their guidance is more

practical than the supervisors' whose guidance is more theoretical. When it comes to support, both supervisors and mentors support pre-service teachers inside and outside the classroom. Supervisors also spoke about their role in observing, giving feedback, assessing, and motivating pre-service teachers. One, for example, mentioned the importance giving instant feedback to the development of pre-service teachers' performance and teaching practices. She said, "we must provide support at any time for the students. This support and feedback will help them to improve all their skills one at a time."

In terms of the key factors of comfort which affected supervisors during field experience, they revealed three major sources of comfort: (1) they were satisfied with the clear, well-structured program; (2) they appreciated the collaboration and coordination with the partner schools; and (3) they valued the direct contact with the mentors. First, supervisors emphasised the importance of how the numbers of lessons, visits, and requirements were very well established in the program. One supervisor indicated, "In the handbook, it is clear when the student should come into the class, when they should leave, how many lessons they will give, etc...". Second, it was imperative for them that the school administrations collaborate with them when it comes to logistics and scheduling. They mentioned particularly that the schools were welcoming and that there were good resources that pre-service teachers were allowed to use. Third, they appreciated the guidance of the mentors and they valued the opportunity to meet them and have direct contact with them to discuss the pre-service teachers' performance. One supervisor said,

All the students that I have are speaking highly of their mentors and how they are benefiting from their immediate support and feedback. This makes me worry less about them and makes my job a bit less stressful.

Regarding the challenges that the supervisors mentioned in the interviews, it was clear that there were some discrepancies in opinions. Although many supervisors said that the system was well-structured, some found inconsistencies and mismatches between the requirements and expectations of the school and of the university. One supervisor mentioned the matter very clearly.

The inconsistency of documents that the university expects and what is actually in the schools is a problem. For example, in the development of learning plans, the university is very clear in specifying learning outcomes that are specific, measurable and clear but the school doesn't always match this.

Other faculty supervisors discussed logistics issues such as having a big number of pre-service teachers in the same class or the scheduling of two visits to different schools on the same day. Additionally, collaboration and building relationships with the partner schools were also challenging especially when schools were consistently interfering in the requirements of the program.

Another obstacle identified by faculty supervisors was the cultural aspect related to pre-service teachers' placement in private and/or public schools. For example, one male

faculty supervisor mentioned that when he visited a public school, he felt awkward. He explained that,

As a male, I felt uncomfortable visiting an all-female government school and dealing with the Emirati mentors. Although they were welcoming, the underlying cultural barriers are hard to ignore. They pose a restraint to the whole experience.

Cultural barriers, in the context of this study, are evident in the public education sector where schools are segregated. Public education in the UAE is gender-separated in K-12 and higher education.

An additional problematic factor was pre-service teachers' performance in their field placement. Although many supervisors were happy with their pre-service teachers' achievements, some complained that the majority lacked time management skills and presented poor last-minute lesson plans which impacted the quality of the lesson and teaching. Other barriers to pre-service teachers' performance included their poor language skills. The majority of UAE nationals attend public schools which use Arabic as the official language. As such, most of the pre-service teachers are fluent in Arabic and not necessarily in any other language, especially English. This poses a problem as the private schools teach in English and the students are usually from multinational backgrounds and not necessarily Arabic speakers. This is also a problem when the faculty supervisor is a native English speaker who is not bilingual. The last problematic issue mentioned by supervisors was the choice of mentors. Faculty supervisors believed that some mentors were not up to the level needed for effective mentoring and didn't know how to evaluate pre-service teachers or to increase their efficacy in the classroom. Such a problem would lead to difficult situations, such as,

We don't have the ability to choose the mentors so sometimes half way through the practicum we have to change the mentor. The schools assign the mentors at their own convenience and we can basically take it or leave it.

When identifying strengths and weaknesses of pre-service teachers, faculty supervisors highlighted the development of their students' confidence as they progressed through the program. They expressed that this was clear at the university, inside the classroom, and when they communicated with their mentors and school administrators. The development of pre-service teachers' confidence levels is also clear in their teaching skills. One faculty supervisor revealed that "pre-service teachers were more relaxed with dealing with kids and had better relationship and interaction with them." Another participant explained that "they were better at activity planning and execution, using technology in their teaching." Lastly, as per faculty supervisors' opinions, the program also enhanced pre-service teachers' ability to differentiate instruction to meet different students' needs and learning styles. However, faculty supervisors believed that despite these improvements, pre-service teachers were still unable to innovate and use creative thinking in their classrooms to their fullest extent.

**RQ 3: What factors should be amended, changed, or added to reach better field experience results?**

When supervisors were asked to give their recommendations regarding the program, they wanted to keep the following two main characteristics. First, they were happy with the way the program courses were mandatory and once per week (keeping in mind that Internship student numbers stay minimal at 6 students per supervisor). Second, the materials used were useful, particularly the syllabus, handbook, lesson plans and evaluation templates. They wanted to keep field experience courses graded as Pass/Fail.

Although most of the supervisors were satisfied with the program, they still had major recommendations for the enhancement of the program on two levels. The first one is the enrolment system. They wanted the enrolment to be done early in the academic year so all pre-service teachers could know which school they will attend. This process would be quicker if memoranda of understanding were signed with the partner schools and school placements were chosen early on. Pre-service teachers should also be given a choice between placement in public or private schools, depending on the career path they plan to follow. Currently, the college places them randomly. Also language levels and proficiency of pre-service teachers should be checked prior to placement. Moreover, mentors' abilities also need to be vetted. Lastly, the program can be enhanced by adding more hours for the teaching practice; they believed that one day per week was not enough for Practicum III.

The required enhancements for the supervisors' and mentors' experience involve improved coordination among all stakeholders, so that learning outcomes are clear for all, to avoid any confusion. The mentors should be more knowledgeable of their role in the program, hence more detailed orientation is required. What was suggested was an official meeting between pre-service teachers, mentors and supervisors before the start of the placement, to get to know each other and to identify the pre-service teachers' needs. Also, the design of the field experience should be revisited to include more technology-oriented outcomes, to ensure that the learning objectives increase students' critical thinking skills, and lastly to encourage peer-observation and self-assessment.

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of pre-service teachers and faculty supervisors as well as the challenges they face during field experience in a teacher preparation program at the College of Education at a public university in the UAE. Results of the current study suggest that there are three main issues to be studied carefully in order to pinpoint the challenges faced by both parties. Pre-service teachers and faculty supervisors perceived the importance of having a well-structured field experience in their teacher education. Similar to Altan and Saqlamel (2015) and Zeichner (2010), findings of this study highlighted the role of mentors and faculty supervisors as crucial pillars for the pre-service teachers' transition into the teaching profession.

Quantitative and qualitative data revealed that pre-service teachers' content knowledge, teaching strategies, and classroom management skills were improved during their field

experience. Additionally, pre-service teachers mentioned how much they benefited from the supervisors' and mentors' feedback and guidance in the development of their lesson plans and differentiated instructional activities. To enhance their ability to manage the classroom, results showed that having a training course that extends over ten consecutive days instead of once per week over ten weeks would increase pre-service teachers' familiarity with the school program and help them to establish better relationships with students. Extending the duration of the field experience placement with adequate mentoring, modeling, guidance and support are also believed to build pre-service teachers' self-efficacy to perform their instructional tasks (Clark, Byrnes & Sudweeks, 2015).

Similar to findings by Hanline (2010), the field experience program in this study offered pre-service teachers the pedagogical proficiencies relating to planning for differentiated instruction, improved their interaction with students, and enhanced their classroom management skills. Not only that, but results of this study showed that the field experience developed relationships between pre-service teachers and both mentors and supervisors. Crain (2010) and Hamaidi et al. (2014) argued that positive social interaction with mentors is vital in promoting the performance of mentees. Faculty supervisors in this study understood that their role was to mentor these pre-service teachers and to act as role models to them.

Pre-service teachers were concerned about how much flexibility and autonomy were given to them in choosing the type of school and class level that they would like to be placed in. Giving this option to the pre-service teachers would decrease the challenges they face in terms of logistics and scheduling (Meegan et al., 2013), and could increase their motivation towards the profession (Baroudi, Tamim & Hojeij, 2020; Eyal & Roth, 2011). School proximity was also an issue for both pre-service teachers and supervisors, as some pre-service teachers didn't drive and some supervisors were given two classes to observe in two different schools on the same day. It is worth mentioning that in the context of this study, pre-service teachers revealed that the key to their field experience success was placement in both private and public schools. That is because they wanted to try teaching students coming from different backgrounds. Being exposed to students with different backgrounds is believed to increase teachers' confidence and ability to manage diverse classrooms (Baroudi, Tamim & Hojeij, 2020).

Vygotsky (1978) regarded learning as the impacted lived experience transformed into personal meaning. This perspective lends itself to a consideration of how being trained influences the lived experience of those receiving training. As such, it is fundamental for trainers (faculty supervisors) to be properly trained to guide pre-service teachers and build relationships and trust with them, which in turn would enhance the overall field experience quality (Altan & Saqlamel, 2015). However, faculty supervisors believe that the quality is compromised when pre-service teachers are unprofessional and unpunctual. Supervisors also complained that students were not able to innovate and use creative thinking in class (Altan & Saqlamel, 2015). Clarke and Otaky (2006) also mentioned the importance for pre-service teachers acquiring problem-solving skills in the classroom, hence the need for educators in UAE to focus on improving the quality of reflective

practices to fulfill the call of the government for improving the country's education system.

In line with the findings of Meegan et al. (2013), time constraints were identified as a main challenge that both pre-service teachers and faculty supervisors deal with in teacher preparation programs. Pre-service teachers complained about the number of assignments and supervisors acknowledged that students didn't have enough time to work properly on lessons and for supervisors to check the work appropriately and in a timely manner. On another note, supervisors requested mentors to be more knowledgeable about university requirements and goals as well as their roles. Zeichner (2010) asserted that where the teacher education programs are not well coordinated, faculty supervisors tend to fail in preparing teachers to deal with the various complexities of teaching practices.

### **Limitations and implications**

The exploratory nature of this study is a limitation by itself since it involves a small sample. Hence, the results cannot be accurately interpreted for a generalised population. In-depth qualitative studies are recommended to enrich the literature and provide a fuller picture of participants' experiences. Quantitative correlational studies are also needed to examine the association of independent variables (i.e., support from faculty supervisors and school proximity) with the improvement of field experience programs.

Findings of this study imply that teacher preparation programs need to develop field experience programs that increase pre-service teachers' autonomy and freedom. Giving pre-service teachers a say in choosing the type of school or class level that they want to be trained in could be one way to start. Increasing pre-service teachers' autonomy will lead to pre-service teachers to have higher motivation and more positive perceptions of the teaching profession (Baroudi, Tamim & Hojeij, 2020; Eyal & Roth, 2011).

### **Recommendations and conclusion**

Field experience is conceived as a collaborative project, an aggregate of actions that are directed toward a common aim. Thus, the program stakeholders, i.e. supervisors, pre-service teachers, mentors and school administrators should all be part of such a program to ensure its success. Based on the findings of the research, recommendations can be made to improve field experience placements in this study's context.

The first recommendation pertains to establishing memoranda of understanding with several partner schools, which would fast-forward scheduling and placement, and help towards setting clearer goals and objectives at the beginning of the term with students, mentors and schools regarding their roles and responsibilities. Hence, the pre-visit to the placement site and meeting the mentors in advance is very helpful for both mentors and pre-service teachers. The second recommendation is at the level of the grades. It is believed that grading the practicum courses would make the field experience more meaningful, especially as some students work harder than others and they still all pass. In

other words, hard work and average work are rewarded in the same way as the course outcomes are Pass/Fail.

The third recommendation lies in the type and proximity of the school pre-service teachers are assigned to. It is recommended that all pre-service teachers try both public and private schools so they are exposed to both curricula and cultures. Additional consideration needs to be given to the proximity of the schools to the pre-service teachers' homes as they must arrange their own transportation to the field experience schools. A final recommendation was made to revisit the requirements of the field experience program and to align the expectations of faculty supervisors with the partner schools. Also, it is equally important to ensure having a common ground for the teaching evaluation criteria between the mentors in the various schools.

In conclusion, this research paper focused on the many benefits and challenges experienced by supervisors and pre-service teachers during their field experience placement. Findings of this exploratory study highlight the factors that could enrich the pre-service teachers' abilities in facing their future careers as elementary teachers, and the areas for improvement to be addressed to reach this objective.

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31.	The field experience expanded my abilities to use teaching strategies to suit individual whole classes.									
32.	The field experience helped me to differentiate my lessons to meet my students' diverse needs.									
33.	The field experience increased my abilities in using multiple methods of assessing student work.									

**Questions:**

In thinking about your field experience with COE, what would you keep and why?

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In thinking about your field experience with COE, what would you change and why?

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Any additional comments:

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**Appendix B: Faculty interviews**

1. Can you please give me a brief overview of your academic profile?
2. What has been your experience with Zayed University? Have you taught at other universities in the UAE?
3. Can you tell me about your experience with practica and field experience in COE?
4. How would you define your role as a university supervisor?
5. How would you define the role of the mentor during teacher preparation?
6. What were the key factors that made you feel comfortable during the field experience?
7. What were the factors which were problematic?
8. What recommendations would you make regarding the use of the field experience on teacher preparation? What would you keep? What would you change?
9. What are the things you feel our students are most prepared for during their field experience?
10. What are their weakest spots?

## Appendix C: Reflective journals

### Pre-service teachers' journal

Please complete this journal at the end of your practicum to indicate the challenges you have faced during your school placement. Please comment in detail on the challenges that you faced in your duties as a pre-service teacher.

<p>What were the challenges you faced in your practicum?</p> <p>Why?</p> <p>How did you resolve them?</p>
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### University supervisor journal

*Part A:*

Please complete this table to indicate the amount of time commitment that school supervision involves weekly. Add columns for the weeks as needed.

Time spent	Week 1	Week ...	Total
Commuting to/from the school			
Making arrangements for observation visits			
Meeting mentors for orientation and update			
Meeting teacher candidates for feedback and preparation			
Writing observation reports			
Dealing with last minute situations			
Doing school rounds / Informal observations			
Other (s)... please specify			

*Part B:*

Please comment on the challenges that face you in your duties as a university supervisor. Sample ones are listed and add others as you see appropriate based on your supervision experience.

Challenge	Comments
<b>Administrative related to the school</b> (e.g. communication with mentor teachers and administration, logistics such as access, place to sit or meet, ...)	

<b>Administrative related to university</b> (timely placements of students, allocation of schools, ...)	
<b>Teacher candidates</b> (e.g. lack of communication or coordination, attitude, ...)	
<b>Other ... please specify</b>	

*Part C:*

Please comment on the challenges faced by the teacher candidates based on your supervision experience (e.g. time management, lesson planning, classroom management, communication with mentor ...)

Challenge	Comments

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